"It was his mother's slave standing there, in her black gown, with a candle in her hand."—Page 205.

a candle in
NEEDFUL

ONE THING NEEDFUL

A Novel

BY THE AUTHOR OF

"LADY AUDLEY'S SECRET" "VIXEN,"

"ISHMAEL," ETC.

Stereotyped Edition.

LONDON

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ONE THING NEEDFUL

CHAPTER I

'OH, MARKED FROM BIRTH, AND NURTURED FOR THE SKIES'

THE gray old walls of Lashmar Castle rise in a massive pile above a broad reach of the Middleshire Avon, which here makes a bold and sweeping curve, and dallies with its rushy banks, as if some spirit of these Lashmar woods were the Cleopatra to that watery Antony. The stream has such a languorous flow just at this point; the river here spreads itself into such a placid expanse, that one would hardly credit the current with force enough to turn a water-mill or drift a barge. It has an Arcadian air, a river made for Chloe and Phillis, and Strephon and his flock, and not for the vulgar uses of daily life. Yet that very river waxes utilitarian enough, and carries all foul things which a seething populace cares to cast into its waters; it puts on the dark livery of smoke and dirt, only a few miles to the east of these Lashmar woods yonder, where the great manufacturing town of Brumm obscures the heavens with the smoke of numberless chimneys, and taints the atmosphere with the mixed odours of the people. But here there is no hint of that great industrial centre. No one basking on the green slope above this

glassy stream, between a foreground of bulrushes and a background of immemorial oaks, would suspect the existence of such a place as Brumm within ten miles.

Yet, although its smoke made no stain upon the blue sky above yonder gray towers, Brumm had an influence on the inhabitants of Lashmar Castle, and that by no means a pleasant influence; as witnessed by her ladyship's temper upon this particular morning, as she sat at breakfast in the oak parlour, with her step-son, Lord Lashmar, and the Eton boy, her son.

Her ladyship was the Dowager Baroness Lashmar, and a woman of mark. She was one of the daughters of the illustrious Marchioness of Pitland, famous alike for wealth, talent, and force of character. Old Lady Pitland had given laws and fashions to society for nearly forty years before she was translated to that better world in which, perhaps, there are neither coal mines nor leaders of fashion: and she had transmitted much of her managing power, and something of her talent and charm to her daughters, the eldest of whom, as Duchess of Malplaquet, was said to be quite the cleverest matron in England, having managed to marry all her daughters to rich men, and to have dressed and fed them in their spinsterhood, and maintained appearances in town and country on something under five thousand a year.

Lady Lashmar's powers as an economist had not been so severely taxed; for the Lashmars were rich in stocks and shares, as well as in that luxury of the well-born, broad acres; and they could smile serenely at the decay of rents. Lady Lashmar had always had as much money as she wanted, and some of her tastes were costly; but there was not an ounce of butter or a tea-cup of milk

wasted at Lashmar Castle; there was not a dirty corner, or an unauthorised follower in the great, rambling, old house in Grosvenor Square, which had belonged to the Lashmars from the time of the Pitts and the Foxes, when that aristocratic and exclusive square first came into being. Lady Lashmar had the eye of a hawk, and a mind constructed on the principle of the elephant's trunk which can uproot an oak, or pick up a pin. Lady Lashmar's mind could grapple with public questions; and it could stoop to the details of the store-closet and the larder. Yet, it must not be supposed that Lady Lashmar's bodily presence was ever beheld in kitchen or store-room. Her mind did all the work. She had a housekeeper who trembled at her frown, and who obeyed her slavishly: and through this faithful servant she was able to rule every corner of her house, to measure every meal eaten by her household, to be assured that the footmen did not consume more than their due allowance of table-beer, and that the maids did not burn their candles in the small hours reading novels, or making bonnets.

Lady Lashmar had been ten years a widow, had enjoyed just a decade of undisputed dominion; she was eight-and-thirty, handsome, straight as a dart, with not a wrinkle or a gray hair. Mrs. Monsoon, the Princess's own particular dressmaker, had been heard to say, in the confidence of friendly intercourse, that Lady Lashmar was the finest figure she had on her books, and the greatest screw.

'I don't believe I have made twenty pounds out of that woman in all the years I have worked for her,' said Mrs. Monsoon; 'but she shows off my gowns to perfection, and she brings me new customers.'

An age in which scandals about the aristocracy are the current coin of conversation had not furnished one hint of evil about Lady Lashmar. It was of her that Lord Blandville, the cabinet minister, said, 'My friend Lashmar's wife has all the virtues. She is handsome, well informed, accomplished, dignified, chaste as Diana, and the most disagreeable woman of my acquaintance.'

Lady Lashmar was not a person who got into violent passions when she was angry. It was said that old Lady Pitland had been wont to swear like a trooper at anybody who crossed her imperious will. Lady Lashmar's anger took a more dignified and a more intense form. This morning the finely-cut face was almost livid with passion as her ladyship handed the local paper, the *Brumm Independent*, to her step-son.

They were sitting at a cosy round table in one of the prettiest rooms in the castle. It was a small, low room, in which the old oak-panelling had been painted white. The ceiling was decorated with cupids and garlands. The high, narrow mantelshelves were lit up by bright little bits of old oriental china. The curtains and chair-covers were of the delicatest chintz; and in every spot where flowers could be placed were bowls and shallow vases of the famous Lashmar roses, red and yellow, now in the plenitude of their summer beauty. So long as the roses lasted, Lady Lashmar would have no other flowers to decorate her rooms. It was in vain that the head-gardener put forward his rarities from the stoves, 'I will have no exotics while I can have roses,' said Lady Lashmar.

She sat with her face to the window, as one who need not fear the light. No, there was not one line that told of advancing years upon the hard, handsome face. Those finer emotions which plough the

human countenance, the cark and fret of sensitive natures, had never affected Lady Lashmar. She had almost always had her own way, and she had almost always been happy. When it pleased Heaven to take her husband, after six years of married life, she bowed to the rod. He was twenty years her senior, and a chronic invalid. It was better that he should be called away at fifty years of age than that he should drag out a life of suffering to the scriptural three-score and ten. Lady Lashmar thought that Providence would have done well to take her husband's afflicted son and to leave her own boy, a fine healthy youngster, to fill the place which the deformed step-son could never hold with proper dignity.

Yes, deformed. It is one of those words which are hardest to say. The old servants who had known Lord Lashmar from his cradle said that his back was a little weak; but his step-mother was not a person to sophisticate, or to use soft words. She knew that his spine had been curved in his infancy, a weakly child, born of an over-educated hyper-intellectual mother, and a father who had lived not wisely but too well. She knew that in the years to come that bent back would get gradually worse, that narrow chest would invite the attack of phthisis. She told herself that Hubert, Lord Lashmar, would never make old bones; but she feared that he might live long enough to marry and leave some sickly son who should blight the prospects of her boy, Victorian, the very embodiment of physical power and fresh unblemished youth.

She had not been unkind to her step-son. She was far too clever a woman, to make that irreparable mistake. She resolved in the very beginning of things to live pleasantly with her husband's son.

It would be so much better for them both; especially for her. Lashmar was fourteen when his father died, and Victorian was five, a difference of nine years; and Lashmar was old for his years. He had never been at any public school. He had not ventured to face the light-hearted republic of a University. What should he, the pariah, the stricken one, do there, among the athletic and robust? He had been brought up in cotton-wool, as it were. He had a middle-aged tutor, who had been with him from his tenth year, and who remained with him as librarian and secretary; and he had an old servant. He had travelled a good deal with the tutor and the servant. He had read more than most young men of five-and-twenty. He was a good classical scholar, and had some knowledge of science. In a word, he was a sickly lad, who had been brought up and nourished upon books; but he had fine instincts, and a strong humanitarian feeling. The villagers about Lashmar adored him. He drank tea with the old women, read to them when they were ill, wrote letters for young and old, talked politics or metaphysics with the deep-thinkers, and carried the light of a noble intellect into every house he entered.

Lady Lashmar was intense in politics, and all her ideas upon legislation were of the good old Tory flavour. She hated Radicals; and her greatest affliction in life was that Lashmar Castle should lie as it were in the very bosom of revolution. Brumm was Radical to the backbone, and Brumm was only ten miles off. Brumm was a centre of Freethinking and Nihilism; and Brumm was at her door. If Aladdin's African magician had been at hand to whisk off her castle to the furthest north, or the remotest west of England, her ladyship would have paid him handsomely for the operation. But

Lashmar Castle was planted deep in that detested soil; and as her ladyship despised the dower house, which was hers by right, and loved this baronial mansion and its much statelier surroundings, she was fain to endure the vicinity of Brumm and its forty thousand operatives.

'It is an outrage against the decencies of life,' she exclaimed.

'What's the matter, mother?' asked Lashmar, looking up at her with his deep-sunken eyes, thoughtful eyes of darkest hazel. 'Is it anything about Boldwood?'

'Of course it is about Boldwood. That low creature has been holding forth at another meeting. They seem to be perpetually having meetings at Brumm.'

'They have very few other pleasures,' murmured Lashmar.

'They have theatres and circuses and horrid low music rooms,' said her ladyship. 'Surely those are enough for them!'

'Enough for the frivolous majority; but you see there is a superior minority who have learnt to think and who want to say their little say upon great public questions.'

'Those thinkers and spouters are the pest of society,' exclaimed Lady Lashmar, throwing her paper aside, and going on with her breakfast, with an air of finding no savour in either truffled chicken or the Arabian berry. 'Over-education is the greatest evil of the age. Thank heaven the people themselves are beginning to feel the burden of it. After clamouring for free schools and higher teaching they are beginning to groan under the tyranny of compulsory education.'

'Perhaps that is because when they cry for bread we give them a stone,' answered Lashmar

in his gentle, meditative way. 'We cram 'ologies down the throats of starving children; we feed babes and sucklings with grammar and logic, and then wonder that they are not grateful.'

'That class of people never are grateful,' said Lady Lashmar, calmly ignoring her stepson's drift. 'But, fortunately, there are not many such wretches as Boldwood, or we should have this castle sacked, and find ourselves turned out upon the high road. Boldwood is worse than Robespierre. Just read his tirade upon the unequal division of property, his revolutionary language about great landowners, and his savage insolence about the Duke of Northerland.'

'Boldwood always goes too far. Yet there are generally some flashes of sense amidst the cloud of rhetoric. I read that speech of his before you came down to breakfast. He pleads the cause of the yeoman rather cleverly—when one considers that as an operative he cannot have very keen sympathies with the agricultural class. His idea of dividing some of our great farms into small holdings, and selling them to the peasantry, to be paid for by instalments, upon the same system as that on which needy people buy pianos, is not at all bad.'

'And a pleasant place England would be for decent people to live in if it were chopped up in little bits to please such men as Mr. Boldwood. But, really, Lashmar, I believe you are at heart a Radical,' said her ladyship.

'No, I am a progressive Conservative; and I believe the truest conservatism consists in doing the utmost we can for the people. We can only teach them to respect the privileges of property by letting them taste the sweetness of possession. There is no stauncher Conservative than your working-man who has saved a hundred pounds.'

'You always talk like a book, Lashmar,'

sneered her ladyship; 'I should like to hear you speak in reply to this man Boldwood, at a great public meeting.'

In her heart of hearts she was thinking how sorry a figure this hunch-backed stepson of her's would make upon a public platform; how poorly his low, grave tones would sound after Boldwood's base bellowing, a voice which thundered and reverberated through a vast building, as if it were the roar of Bashan's mightiest bull.

'Would you really like to hear me speak?' asked Lashmar, smiling faintly.

Was there ever a young man who has read and thought deeply who does not long to give speech to his thoughts? It is to satisfy this desire that Mechanics' Institutes are built; it is for this that an Athenæum is a pleasant thing in a town.

'I should like this blatant beast to be answered!' replied her ladyship somewhat evasively.

'Then I will do my best to answer him next Wednesday week,' said Lashmar. 'There is to be a Conservative meeting at the Town Hall on that night. Colonel Spillington, the new Conservative candidate, is going to address the electors. It is expected that Boldwood will be in full force, and that there will be a row. Spillington has asked me to support him—and—yes, I really should like to answer Boldwood. Mine will be a very poor speech, of course; a very tame reply to Boldwood, who is a born orator; but I shall have education on my side—'

'And prestige,' added Victorian, who had been too busy with his breakfast to speak before. 'I only wish I were old enough to tackle Boldwood. I'd make his hair curl.'

'What hideous expressions these boys pick up at Eton,' said her ladyship, with a shiver. Then

with a fond approving look at the handsome lad, she said proudly:

'I hope you will be in Parliament before you are ten years older, Victorian, and that you will be a distinguished politician.'

'Oh, I don't mind going into the House in ten years time,' answered the boy easily, 'but I should like to have my fling on the Continent for a few years first, as Henry St. John had, don't you know, before he sat for the family borough. Nothing enlarges a fellow's views like diplomacy. I shall get on to one of the legations directly I leave college, Paris, if possible, and see as much as I can of life before I pin myself down to politics.'

'Paris is an admirable place—for a young man who wants to waste his time pleasantly,' said Lashmar, smiling at the embryo diplomatist.

'Did you waste your time there?' asked the boy.

'No, Vic. I am not the kind of person to succeed in Parisian society. My gifts are in another line.'

'Poor Old Lashmar! You are out and away the cleverest chap I know. When I think of how much you've read, and how much better you can construe a Greek play than our Toffs in the sixth, I take off my hat to you. Do speak next Wednesday week, Lash, and give that Radical chap a good shaking.'

'We'll hear what Spillington says about it,' answered Lashmar quietly; 'if he wants me, I'll speak. He is to stay here the night before the meeting. You don't mind, do you, mother?'

Lord Lashmar always deferred to his step-mother in all household matters, invitations, and engagements. There were only four rooms in Lashmar Castle in which he reigned supreme. The library was one, and his own sitting-room,

bed-room, and dressing-room were the others. Outside those rooms he exercised no authority. The Lashmar library was the finest in Middleshire —one of the finest in England. The apartment which accommodated that noble collection of books was worthy of the treasures it contained. It was long and lofty, with a fire-place at each end, the oak chimney-pieces carved by Grinling Gibbons, the ceiling enriched with oak carving, the book-cases in harmony with chimney-pieces and ceiling. Lord Lashmar's writing table and reading desk, his capacious arm-chair and dainty little tea-table, only made an island of furniture in the vast expanse of oak flooring, relieved here and there by an oasis of old Indian carpet. The only bright colouring in the room was furnished by the books. The Lashmars had been connoisseurs in bookbinding for the last hundred years. They had spent thousands upon that elegant art. They had 'wasted' thousands, said the unappreciative outer world, persons slow to understand that the case of a shabby-looking duodecimo Elzevir ought to cost four or five pounds.

Lashmar's sitting-room opened out of the library and would have seemed a large room in a smaller house. It was lined from floor to ceiling with bookshelves, containing the young peer's own particular library, those books which had been the one luxury of his life. New books, or new editions, for the most part—books in several languages—books that had been their owner's consolation in many a day of bodily weakness and weariness: for Lashmar's life had been made up of brief intervals of health between long periods of illness. Those halcyon days of well-being were very sweet to him. At such times he spent almost all his life out of doors, and

revelled in nature's loveliness as only a highly-trained mind can revel; tasting the most infinite details in the feast of beauty, the lights and shadows on the petals of a primrose, the sheen on a beetle's wing; enjoying every variety of atmosphere and colouring, every form of lowliest life, with that sensitive instinct for nature which breathes in every line of Wordsworth's descriptive verse.

He had travelled much, and knew nature in her most glorious aspects, but he had no need to go far afield for beauty. The woodlands around Lashmar, the low hills and pastural valleys, the winding Avon and the English hedgerows furnished a banquet which always satisfied the longings of his soul.

'If I had but any one to whom I could tell all my foolish fancies, I should be ever so much happier,' he said to himself sometimes regretfully, 'but there is no one. Victorian would only laugh at me as a queer old chap; and my lady would lift her eyebrows and inwardly wonder if there was a strain of madness in the Lashmar blood.'

CHAPTER II

'WHENCE AND WHAT ART THOU, EXECRABLE SHAPE?'

COLONEL SPILLINGTON dined at Lashmar Castle upon the night before the meeting. He was a fine average specimen of the British officer, bluff, outspoken, unintellectual, right-thinking and honest, a staunch Conservative, and a thorough gentleman. He was a man of just sufficiently good family to be tolerable in the eyes of the great Lady Pitland's daughter. There was at least no taint of trade in his lineage, and he was therefore qualified to sit at the table with the lady whose wealth had for the most part come out of the coal pit, and who naturally scorned the idea of commerce. He was not elated about his election, and had dark doubts as to the power of the Radicals in Brumm. 'There must be some respectable people in the place,' he said.

'I fear not,' replied her ladyship. 'If there were any respectable people such a person as Boldwood would not be allowed to exist.'

'Unfortunately for us, mother, the days are past when an obnoxious citizen could be sent about his business, or even put in the pillory. Boldwood is peaceable enough in his private life, I believe, although he is somewhat truculent on the platform.'

'Somewhat!' echoed Lady Lashmar, 'you have such a namby-pamby way of expressing yourself. I have never heard the creature speak,

but I have read his virulent nonsense in the papers, and that is enough.'

'Virulent, sometimes, I grant, but not always nonsense,' said Lashmar quietly. 'The man's ideas are Utopian, but he expresses himself with a certain rough vigour, and with a strain of poetry—in fact, the man is a born orator—and although he is for the most part illogical, he has occasional flashes of common-sense.'

'Who is this Boldwood?' asked the Colonel, trifling with an olive; 'everybody has been talking to me about him since I consented to stand for Brumm; and, as I am a stranger in the land and his reputation is entirely local, I confess myself still in the dark as to this powerful antagonist whom I am to meet to-morrow night.'

'Mr. Boldwood is a high priest of advanced Radicalism,' answered Lashmar. 'He believes in the divine right of every man to lay hands upon any other man's possessions. He is strong upon the old thesis, la proprieté c'est le vol. The first man who enclosed a bit of ground was the enemy of the whole human race. He is the sworn foe of the landowner and the manufacturer. His gods are Rousseau and Karl Marx. He would level all ranks, wage war against all privileged classes, raze this house of ours to the ground, or turn it into a hospital or a phalanstery, do away with Monarchy and the House of Lords, and establish a Republican senate of working men in which the brain-workers or the professional classes should be as one in three. He would have universal peace—universal free trade: and pending the falling in of other nations with these views, he would have England walk in gospel ways, and turn her left cheek to be smitten by the hand that has boxed her soundly on the right cheek.'

'You say he is a good speaker.'

'I have never heard him; but I am told that he is magnificent, and his speeches read like oratory. I am looking forward to the fun to-morrow night. We may be in a minority; but there are plenty of Conservatives in Brumm, in spite of her ladyship's doubts, and we shall make a good fight. From what I have heard of Boldwood he is not altogether a ruffian—indeed there are some people who declare that he is a gentleman by birth, and took a degree at Oxford. Yet I should hardly think this likely, from the appearance of the man. He was pointed out to me once in the street as I was driving through Brumm—a giant with unkempt hair, disreputable clothes, and a slouching walk. I hardly saw his face, but I got a good idea of his build and general style. He is a brass-worker, earns high wages, and is said to be almost a genius in his handicraft. He is not a native of Brumm; and I don't think anyone in the place knows much about his antecedents. He is an infidel, and seems proud of his infidelity. He came to the town seven years ago, with a wife and a baby. The wife died soon after his arrival, and he has not married again. That, Colonel, is the full extent of my information about Jonathan Boldwood.'

'I am looking forward to my encounter with the gentleman!' said the Colonel cheerily! 'He shall see that I can stand fire. But I look to you to reply to him. I am no orator.'

'A gentleman is always more than a match for a cad,' said Victorian, who had been making havoc with the peaches while his elders were talking.

'Not when the cad is on his own ground,

and has an audience of five or six hundred cads to back him up,' answered Spillington. 'How many does your Town Hall hold, by the way, Lashmar?'

'Fifteen hundred; and of those you may be sure more than half will be disciples of Boldwood; but that need not alarm you, as not half of those are voters.'

The meeting was at eight o'clock, so the house party at the Castle took a late luncheon, and started for Brumm soon after tea. Supper after the meeting, was to serve as a substitute for the eight o'clock dinner. This had been duly explained to Colonel Spillington, who liked his meals, and thoroughly approved of the Lashmar *chef*. He laid in a heavy stock at luncheon, calculating that there was a terrible gulf to be bridged over before he should again find himself face to face with substantial food. He detested tea, and cakes and muffins, and all those dainties with which Victorian gorged himself at five o'clock, when the little party assembled in Lady Lashmar's morning room, full of the approaching fray.

'Do have some of these chocolate cakes, Colonel,' said Victorian, with his mouth full, 'they're so good.'

'Thanks, no, my boy. I haven't tasted sweets for the last twenty years, and I am afraid of tea. It always turns to acidity. If,' with a deprecating glance at her ladyship, 'if I might have a brandy and soda.'

'By all means,' assented the dowager graciously though she inwardly scorned a man who wanted to be periodically sustained by brandy and soda.

Lashmar rang the bell. 'A little Dutch courage, eh, Colonel?' he said, laughing.

'You're beginning to funk Boldwood, I know,' said Victorian, 'and I don't wonder. He looks like one of those fellows in Homer—Cyclops, don't you know? I've heard that he lived for ever so many years with the gipsies, and that his wife was a gipsy girl. He's a rough sort, Colonel; and I shouldn't wonder if he wanted to come to fisticuffs with you on the platform.'

'If he comes to fisticuffs, I'm ready for him,' answered Spillington gaily, 'it's the talking that will bother me.'

They started soon after six, intending to be early at the Town Hall, where the candidate had to meet his agent, and some of the Conservative notabilities of Brumm.

It was a delicious summer evening, calm, peaceful, the atmosphere steeped in sunlight, the earth breathing warmth and perfume: a delightful evening on which to loll against the cushions of Lady Lashmar's barouche, to be gently lulled upon Cee springs, as the seventeen-handers trotted with rhythmical beat along the level turnpike road—a lovely road for the first half of the journey, a road between fair green pastures and golden corn, by wood and copse, and hillocky common land, where the dwarf furze shone yellow amidst the purpling heather, a road by peaceful village and Elizabethan homestead, by straw-yards populous with lazy kine, by piggery and poultry yard, and duck pond, and cattle trough. Colonel Spillington, who was of the streets streety, thought that the country was a pretty place enough in the westering sun, but that it had an ugly smell, and must needs be the abomination of desolation in the winter, except for a hunting man. And Colonel Spillington had

nothing in common with that great creature, the British Sportsman. He had shot tigers and bears, and had stuck pigs in Hindostan; but he did not appreciate the raptures of waiting about at corners for a reluctant fox in a north-east wind, or a chilly drizzle.

'A charming country,' he said patronisingly, 'but I wonder you can live so many months in the year at Lashmar Castle!'

'I am fond of the country, and Lashmar detests London,' answered her ladyship. 'I dare say when Victorian grows up I shall spend more of my time in Grosvenor Square.'

'I am not going to live in London,' said her son disdainfully. 'When I leave the University I mean to see life. I shall travel all over Europe. I mean to be a man of the world.'

'You had better stay in London if you want to see life,' said the Colonel. 'The man who has not learnt his Society-alphabet in London is always half a savage. It is all very well to talk about the superiority of foreign manners, but the man who has been educated on the Continent is generally a tiger!'

'Then I will be a tiger,' retorted Victorian stoutly.

They were nearing Brumm, and there was an unmistakable change in the atmosphere. The fine gold had become dim. That pure radiance of the westering sun was thickened and blurred, yet beautiful exceedingly athwart the smoke-clouds. The tall shafts began to show against the blue horizon, a veritable grove of chimneys; and soon her ladyship's splendid barouche, with its big bay horses, white-wigged coachman, and powdered footman, its emblazoned panels, and brazen harness was thrilling the souls of operatives and factory

girls as it flashed along the dingy crowded streets, past the beer-shops and the pork butchers, and the general dealers, and the bakers, amidst odours of tallow and herrings, and onions and shoe-leather and beer. The street boys called out 'Hooray,' as the carriage went by. One keen-eyed brat caught the distorted profile of Lashmar's back, and cried out, 'My eye! look at the hunchback.'

Lashmar's quick ear heard, and his thin lips contracted ever so slightly, with the faintest expression of mental pain. He had heard just such a speech many a time before. It did not come upon him as a revelation. He knew that he was a creature apart, marked out and branded by Nature. Wealth and rank and culture could never undo what Nature, in one blundering moment, had done. The hand that had turned out so many thousands of ploughboys and operatives, beggars and rascals, perfect from head to heel, had faltered in the making of the last Lord of Lashmar: and he must pay the penalty of fate. He bore the disgrace as patiently as he bore that other and heavier burden of neuralgic pain, which had wrung his weak frame at intervals ever since he could remember. He had fought against long odds; had exercised that poor weak body of his to the utmost—rowing, riding, walking. He, the hunchback, was a skilled gymnast; but he had never exhibited his skill in any public gymnasium. His own keen sense of the ridiculous hindered any such foolish vanity.

The meeting had been convened by the local Conservative Association, but it was not a ticket meeting. The hall was to be open to all comers, and the hall was crammed to overflowing before the speeches began. The great oblong room reeked with unwashed, or badly washed, humanity, a multitude clad in long-worn corduroy and fustian, simmering

in the glare of the gas. To Lady Lashmar, seated on the platform, that sea of faces in that coarse flare of yellow light, suggested an over-populated pandemonium. They looked like devils, some of those operatives, to her unaccustomed eye. Malignant devils—swarthy, grinning, lurid.

The chairman opened the business in a mildly conventional manner; recapitulated the usual commonplaces. The country was on the eve of a great crisis, a crisis involving national interests and individual interests alike, trade, security, prosperity, peace at home, honour abroad. The time had come when the Conservative party were called upon to emerge from that shade in which their modesty delighted; the time, in short—after a great deal more to the same purpose—had come for a long pull, and a strong pull, and a pull altogether.

This was the chairman's popular style, which he had generally found answer before a mixed audience. But on this present occasion, before the Conservatives could begin their applause, a hoarse voice at the back of the hall called out, 'Yes, and pull the boat over; that's about what you Conservatives generally does when you do pull together,' and there was a laugh which spoiled the effect of Mr. Mason Bank's peroration. And now it was time for the candidate to introduce himself, which he did in a somewhat rambling speech upon old, old lines. The men of Brumm had heard such speeches ever since they had possessed ears to hear political discussion. Colonel Spillington was a poor orator, and he had nothing new to say. But he was hearty, and he had a pleasant manner; he had the courage of his opinions too, and threw some pretty big stones at the opposite party, in the teeth of hisses and groans from the majority, for it appeared as if the Radicals were the most numerous. They were certainly the

loudest. It might be that noise prevailed over numbers.

Before the Colonel could sit down, a man stood up in the middle of the hall, an Anak, a giant among dwarfs, for the men of Brumm were stunted by unhealthy toil. A dark, threatening face was turned towards the platform, full in the glare of the gas; a large face with a broad forehead, high cheek bones and massive jaw, flashing eyes under shaggy brows, a shock of coarse black hair.

Lashmar looked at that face transfixed. He had seen it before—seen it years and years ago—in a dream, before he was born, yes, in some mystical anterior life, as it seemed to him. He knew its every line. Yes, those lineaments were graven deep upon the tablets of memory.

CHAPTER III

'ALL THAT HAVE EYES TO WEEP, SPARE ONE TEAR WITH ME'

'I RISE to move an amendment,' said Jonathan Boldwood, in a deep strong voice.

'On the platform, get upon the platform, Boldwood,' roared the crowd. 'Let's hear thee, man, thou hast always summat good to say. Bravo, Boldwood! Three cheers for Boldwood!'

And there was a shout that seemed as if it would rend the roof of the building, a thrill of delight as at the appearance of some favourite actor. The crowd made way for the orator, and the applause grew deafening, as he scrambled on to the platform,

shook his rough mane, folded his arms, and looked round the assembly, those eyes of his shining like coals of fire.

'You want to hear me speak, friends,' he said, in his deep thrilling voice. 'You shall! You have had plenty of fustian from these gentlemen. You shall have a little bit of sound cloth from me—stuff that will stand wear and tear, not devil's dust that will come to bits directly you pull at it.' And then he began to attack the Colonel's speech. He took the old, old story, point by point, from the Revolutionist's side; he laughed to scorn the old institutions, the old opinions, bishops and peers, church and state, royal sinecures, royal allowances, princely nobodies, useless functionaries. He spoke with the force and vigour of Danton, with the *finesse* of Mirabeau; he spoke as a rebel against his queen and against his God. His finest points were barbed with blasphemy; but he had the audience with him from the moment he opened his mouth. He swayed them as the wind sways the reeds by the river.

'*Your* God, the High Church God, the Tory God, made man in His own image, you tell us. If so He had two images, or you have strangely altered and degraded, mutilated and defaced the image He made. There is man as God made him, free, upright, independent, with all the world before him where to choose, told to live by the sweat of his brow, and to till the land, but never told that he should have no land to till, that his brow and every inch of his body should sweat in the grinding toil of the factory, that your God's beautiful earth should be shut and fenced off from him by an everlasting park-paling, that his world to choose from should be an endless turnpike road, where he should tramp for ever through the dust and heat of summer, through the

mud and mire of winter, in the glare of the dog-days, or with his face to the biting north-easter, and with no halting place but the casual ward, no bourne but the pauper's grave. That is the type of God's noblest work, and the commonest type: such men are as millions against your thousands, you who toil not, you who spend the wages of other men's toil.

'God made the toiler, made Adam to work for his bread—his own bread, mark you—sowing and reaping on his own land, for himself and his family, enjoying the first fruits of the land, rejoicing in the fulness of the harvest, the fatness of his flock, having his share in all the beauty and the glory of this earth. That was patriarchal man as God made him, and as he might have been this day, for God's earth is wide enough for all who live upon it, if it were not for ha-has and park-fences. God's earth is not big enough to keep an aristocracy, not big enough to give parks and deer forests to all the dukes and earls who have sprung from the amours of dead and rotten kings. That is what this earth won't do, and that is what the people of England mean to set their faces against—the profligate splendour of the few who fatten upon the bloody sweat of the many: ay, my friends, a sweat as bloody as that agony in the garden of which your priests tell us; for it means the gradual waste of life worn out untimely in unnatural toil, life-blood ebbing away drop by drop in the factory and in the mine, lives wasted in premature old age, children born and bred in dirt, in ignorance and in squalor, in order that a few foolish faces should be topped by coronets and a sprinkling of fine gentlemen should lead the fashions in good manners and bad morals. Can any man among

you be simple enough to swallow such a lie as that God's image is reflected in *this* type of man? No, my friends: these are the sons of Belial, who come among you this night "flown with insolence and wine," not to ask you for your suffrages, but to order how you shall vote.'

He flung back the coarse iron-gray hair from his low broad brow, and stood like a tower, while the hall rang with applause, varied by timorous hisses from the Conservative minority.

Where had Lashmar seen him before? What was that anterior existence in which this man's face had flashed upon him as it flashed now? but only for a transient span, appearing and vanishing almost in the same moment, flashing past him as it were in a whirlwind, swept away upon the wings of the hurricane.

It was either in that dim, unknown world of a previous life, or it was long, long ago in his earliest boyhood.

Yes, he recalled it all now; the whole scene stood out before him.

It was at the University boat-race. He was a little fellow, with his father and mother, on a lawn at Mortlake, a green lawn shadowed by leafless lime-trees. He was clinging to his mother's gown—the poor sickly mother already marked for death, though he knew it not—clinging to her, breathless with excitement, catching the fever of the crowd, scarce knowing what thrilled him so. The crowd and the river seemed to rock under the cold brightness of the March day, as the two boats shot under the bridge, Oxford three lengths behind.

'That big man, number six, pulls like the devil,' cried Lord Lashmar. 'If he can only last, I believe he'll make them win. I never saw such an oar.'

He mentioned the man's name, but his son had

forgotten that, though he distinctly remembered his father's speech. He had his own little boat on the Avon at this time, and had just learnt to row, so was keenly interested in feats of oarsmanship.

The Oxford boat came past the lawn, gaining upon its antagonist, and then Hubert Lashmar saw the face of the oarsman—a dark, ugly face, strong jaw, broad forehead, beetle brows, but a face made radiant, glorified, god-like almost, by triumph. Oxford was winning. The stroke put on a tremendous spurt, to which number six answered with might and main. The boat was almost lifted out of the water. The other oars nerved themselves for a superhuman effort; a great cry of exultation broke from the crowd: 'Oxford wins!' Men thrilled with the delight of having witnessed a miracle, and that Oxford crew was cheered as never men were cheered along the banks of the Thames.

This was the man. Number six in the Oxford boat nineteen years ago, and the brass-worker yonder, were one and the same. The face was too peculiar a face to be easily forgotten or mistaken for another.

Lashmar rose and came to the front of the platform, braving that multitude of eyes, that broad glare of light. But here there were no street boys to jeer at his deformity. He stood up before men; and Nature's unkindness was a claim upon the respect of even the lowest among the crowd.

He was of the middle height, fairly proportioned from the waist downwards, but the misshapen back and the neck sunk between the shoulders too obviously indicated a malformation of the spine. The pale, classical features, the slender white hands, the indescribable air of high birth and refinement interested even these roughs of Brumm. They had heard that this young Lord Lashmar was a student

and a poet, something like that Lord Byron of whom most of them had read and heard, whose poetry was familiar to many among them in these days of free libraries and advanced thought. They liked the look of the Lord of Lashmar Castle; though they had pledged themselves to those new ideas which were to bring all such lordlings to their proper level, cancel all old grants of land, reduce all ancient privileges, and make the soil of England common property, and all things equal between man and man.

He began to speak, and was heard in silence. He had a grave and steadfast manner, a low, earnest voice, which was distinctly heard at the end of that crowded hall—a voice of a very different calibre from that of Jonathan Boldwood, but a voice of considerable compass notwithstanding, and of finest quality.

'My friends,' he began, 'the gentleman who has just addressed you calls himself your friend, but we all know what the demagogue's friendship means. It means climbing into somebody else's seat upon other men's shoulders. You have heard of Marat, the man whom Charlotte Corday stabbed in his bath, hoping by that one bloody act to stem the torrent of blood which that man was shedding. Now, I am not going to say that Mr. Boldwood is like Marat, or that he would rejoice in that deluge of blood which to Marat was the very wine of life. Mr. Boldwood is an Englishman, and Marat was a Frenchman, and your English demagogue, I am happy to say, is always a very mild translation of the French original. Yet I will venture to say that if Marat were standing on this platform to-night, he would talk to you very much as Mr. Boldwood has talked. He would taunt you with your daily labour as if it were a disgrace to work for your living; as if every one of us—queen and

princes, cabinet ministers, general officers, great sea captains, lawyers, landowners, painters, poets, musicians—do not toil, and bring forth that which we have to produce in the sweat of our brows. Granted that there are the sons of Belial, that there are among the honourable and honoured aristocracy of England a few black sheep, are there no dusky fleeces, do you think, to be found in the factory? Are there no black sheep in the mine? No idlers and malingerers battening upon the toil of others? The warp and the woof of society are woven upon the same lines, my friends, from one end of the fabric to the other; and those who prate to you of equality prate to you of something that never has existed and never can exist. Were Cain and Abel equal before God? No; the Almighty blessed one and cursed the other. Were Jacob and Esau alike in their fate, or were the fortunes of Joseph and his brethren equal? Is Nature equal in her gifts? I stand before you, my friends, this night a living instance of Nature's inequality. Shall I blaspheme against my God because it has pleased Him to make me different from my fellow-men? No, I accept my burden, as other men must needs accept theirs. Be sure there is something in every shoe that pinches the wearer. What I have to do, and what we all have to do, is to make the best of the world we live in for ourselves and for each other; improving away evil gently and by degrees, not by rapid wrenches and volcanic upheavals, but in the gradual ripening of the days and years, clinging to all that was good in England's past, and discarding all that was bad; lopping off the withered branches, but zealously guarding the tree; and that I take it to be true Conservatism, and a truly Liberal Conservatism.'

There was considerable applause from the Con-

servative minority after Lord Lashmar's speech. Boldwood sat facing the audience, his arms folded upon the back of a chair, glaring at them from under those bushy brows of his, with eyes that seemed always to shine with the same angry light: anger at fate, life, fortune—a world in which for him all things were adverse and cruel. Suddenly there arose a murmur of voices, excited voices in the crowd just below the platform—murmurs in which he caught his own name: and then the word "fire!" Some men by the corner of the platform were talking about him, looking up at him.

He bent down and questioned one of them—'What's the matter, mate?'

'Goldwin's! You live at Goldwin's, don't you?'

'Yes!'

'Goldwin's is afire!'

The demagogue bounded from his chair, dropped off the platform, and pushed his way through the crowd, muttering as he went:

'My God! And that child—locked in her room on the fourth story——'

He clutched a man by the shoulder:

'What about this fire?' he gasped. 'Is it true? Who brought the news? When?'

'Not five minutes ago; there's a lot has run off to see. There was a lot of 'em here—a lot of Goldwin's people.'

Boldwood waited to hear no further, but pushed his way on to the door. The news had wrought confusion in the hall already, and the crowd was surging outwards. There was a greater excitement, a fiercer fever of emotion to be had out of doors than the finest speaker could offer within. A great fire was one of the spectacles which Brumm most enjoyed.

Goldwin's was a gigantic building on the eastern outskirts of the town, on that side most remote from Lashmar Castle—a huge model lodging house, built some years before by a friend of humanity who only required nine per cent. for his capital. It was a huge caravanseri, and swarmed like an anthill; for it was better than the dens and hovels of the slums in the heart of the town, inasmuch as it was wind-and-weather-proof, which they were not. The rents exacted for the rooms were high, and it was only the more prosperous of the working classes who could afford to live at Goldwin's.

Boldwood had a couple of rooms there: two little square boxes on the fourth story, one with a fireplace, the other without. He had made the room with the fireplace his little daughter's bedchamber, while he himself slept, and for the most part lived, in the cold. There was a common kitchen at Goldwin's where the inmates could get anything cooked; and there was a common laundry where the women compared their rags and told each other their troubles; and there was a clubroom where the men smoked, and talked politics, and played dominoes—a hot-bed of advanced socialism.

To the dwellers in the slums Goldwin's seemed a lordly mansion, and to live at Goldwin's was a distinction. It was a huge quadrangular building, six stories high, with a courtyard in the centre—a monster pile of ugly yellow brick, pierced with windows all of one pattern, opening on to covered balconies with iron railings—everything straight and square, and flat and uniform. A huge cube of brickwork it looked from the distance, as seen across the level of the flattest, dreariest outskirt of Brumm; uglier than factory, or jail, or workhouse.

To those wealthier citizens whose prospect that huge bulk defaced, it seemed a monstrous blot upon the horizon.

The beneficent Goldwin had bought a couple of acres of waste ground for a song, a quarter of a century before; and when a great cry had gone up to heaven from the penny newspapers, about the way in which the poor of Brumm were lodged, Mr. Goldwin had stood up at a public meeting and pledged himself to build a model dwelling which should be as the workman's paradise. While the building was in progress, Mr. Goldwin was one of the most popular men in Brumm. It was only when his house was finished and his scale of rents made known, that his popularity began to decline. But, although the rents were high, Goldwin's was always full from roof to basement.

The meeting ended amidst confusion, and the last speeches were unheard. The news of the fire had reached the platform, and Lord Lashmar knew that the Radical leader had rushed away to see to the safety of his child. Even her ladyship's sympathies were aroused by the tragedy of the scene.

'To think that such a creature should have so much human feeling!' she exclaimed. 'I hope his people will not be burnt.'

She had not grasped the fact that the demagogue's 'people' were comprised by one only child.

'I think, mother, if you'll allow me, I'll stay and see the end of this business after I've put you into your carriage,' said Lashmar. 'I can get a fly at the George to take me home.'

'I'll stay with you,' said Colonel Spillington.

'And I,' cried Victorian.

'No, Victor, I will not have you struggling in

Brumm crowd!' exclaimed his mother; 'and you, Lashmar, you would not certainly be so foolish as to trust yourself amongst those roughs.'

'They would be safe enough with me,' said the Colonel. 'But the young one can go home with your ladyship; Lashmar and I will see it out.'

Lady Lashmar remonstrated; she offered to wait at the hotel until her stepson was ready to go home with her; but to this Lashmar would not consent. He took his mother to her carriage, and saw Victorian seat himself beside her, very reluctantly. The boy was longing for an adventure; he felt that it was in him to do the work of twenty hireling firemen. The engine came tearing down the street while the carriage stood there, frightening the big bays out of their wits. The firemen looked like demons, the street boys yelped and whooped as the vision of flashing metal and dark resolute faces rushed by. And to have to turn one's back upon that fever of excitement and go home to supper with one's mother! It was hard for impetuous young Eton, strong in the overweening confidence of youth. The barouche drove away through the summer night, drove away from the smoke and grime—towards fields and dewy hills and flowery hedgerows. Lashmar and the Colonel got into a hansom cab — they have had hansoms in Brumm for the last twenty years—and told the driver to go to Goldwin's as fast as he could pelt. Driver and horse were both excited, and rattled off at a tremendous pace.

There were half-a-dozen streets, and an arid waste of market gardens and ground newly plotted out for building, to be traversed before they reached the scene of the fire; unmade roads,

stretching to the right and the left, ghost-like in the moonlight—here a factory, and there a shabby-genteel terrace of new houses, and anon a row of allotment gardens; but straight in front of them they saw Goldwin's, like the fiery pillar in the desert—a monstrous pile, vomiting smoke and flame.

'The fire must have gained ground terribly before the engines arrived,' said Lashmar, leaning forward over the doors of the cab, with his eyes intent upon that flaming bulk yonder.

'Engines never are in time to do any substantial good,' answered Spillington. 'How lucky the fire did not happen in the middle of the night. People would be up and about, and able to help themselves.'

'But the children,' cried Lashmar, almost with a moan of anguish. 'The little children, left alone in that tower of Babel. The careless young mothers roaming the streets; the fathers listening to Boldwood. Perhaps you don't know the kind of mothers that are made out of factory girls. God help the little children! I'll warrant there were dozens of them left to take care of themselves in that big house to-night!'

'That's a horrible idea,' muttered the Colonel, and he felt that there was only too much ground for Lashmar's fear.

They were in front of the house by this time—a dense crowd between them and the building.

'Wait!' said Lashmar to the cabman as he alighted, and he and Spillington pushed their way through the mob.

It was a moment of breathless excitement. The engines were on the other side of the building; the fire-escapes were in full action; but they could not be everywhere. Lashmar had con-

pectured rightly. There was a swarm of children in that human hive: and the mothers were rushing about distractedly, pleading to the firemen, to the crowd, to the empty air even, to save their little ones—pointing wildly to windows: there, there, that one, on the fifth floor, the seventh from the end, that one by the broken rain-pipe—oh! curses on these tall houses, where the children could be roasted alive, and no help possible! The fire had broken out suddenly, with an astounding fury. It was all the work of an hour; but the mischief had been slowly working for long silent days and nights. The brick-work of that huge shaft which went up from the laundry—the common chimney of kitchen, laundry, and club-room—had been red-hot, and none knew. They had only felt the warmth an annoyance in the hot summer nights. No one had guessed that there was danger; and to-night, at ten o'clock, the skirting of one of the rooms next the chimney had burst into flame, and then another, and then another, till a great column of flame was rushing up to heaven through the middle of the house—that central block upon which the initials of William Goldwin, the people's benefactor, stood out boldly above a great black-faced clock, with white metal hands; a clock that had ticked off the brief intervals of rest to many a toiler, but which would never tick again for dead or living, since the metal that had composed its works was running down the brick-work in a molten stream like quicksilver.

Yes; screams, and clasped hands, and dishevelled hair were the livery of all those careless young mothers to-night. Locked in, their children had all been locked in! To hide the lucifers, and to lock the door, that had been the maternal idea of carefulness. Locked in—locked in one of

those pigeon-holes in that great barrack through which the flames were roaring.

While the mothers were rushing to and fro, threading the crowd, falling into the arms of strangers to sob out their woe, shrieking in wildest hysteria, or standing white and dumb waiting for Fate to strike, there was one father who was acting vigorously for himself, asking help from no man.

'Look at him!' gasped the crowd, as Jonathan Boldwood's huge form scaled the iron balconies, clambered and swung himself from one point of vantage to another, mounting higher and higher, showing a dark moving blotch against the red light that shone all over the building, as it had been the palace of the setting sun. 'Look at him! There's a man for you, a man with the heart of a lion. His little girl is up in one o' them rooms—one o' the toppest. The firemen and the 'scapes are all t'other side o' the building. God help him! He'll be suffocated before he gets to that top room!'

This was about the gist of what the crowd said, in short gasps of speech, loquacious, excited, pitying but impotent to help, around and about Lord Lashmar. Neither his gentle blood nor his crooked back attracted any attention in that surging mass of anxious humanity. All distinctions were for the time blotted out. The strong human instinct prevailed over all class differences and conventionalities. The hearts of Radical and Tory throbbed in perfect unison, accelerated by pity and terror.

'He'll do it!' roared the crowd, and Lashmar's memory went back to that other crowd roaring on the Surrey shore, roaring from the flat swamps of Chiswick yonder, two voices meeting and blending across the river. 'He'll do it!' cried the crowd, watching that bulky figure—a figure that had lost the litheness of athletic youth, and which pulled

itself heavily, with the strength of a giant, slowly, laboriously, from iron rail to iron rail, bridging the distance with evident difficulty. 'He'll do it!' and Lashmar remembered the dark face bent over the oar; the resolute under jaw and beetle brow, the dark, cropped hair and bull neck. He fancied he could see the face now, turned towards the burning building, lurid in the reflected light.

'One story more, and he's there!' cried the crowd.

One more rail to grasp, one last effort to swing himself to the higher level; but before he could grasp the rail a great wave of flame and smoke rushed out from the shattered windows in front of him, poured over him like black water, and wrapped him in Egyptian darkness—darkness flecked with arrows of flame. Then there arose a groan as of Samson when the pillars yielded and the roof fell—the groan of a despairing Titan. The crowd reeled backward with a shuddering recoil, and that bulky figure fell in their midst, almost at Lashmar's feet.

There was no help, no hope. The demagogue's neck was broken. He expired without a murmur.

CHAPTER IV

'SO WOE-BEGONE A THING WAS SHE'

WHILE the mob surrounded the dead man, talking over him, lamenting him, waiting for medical help, for a stretcher to carry that motionless bulk of humanity away, Lashmar had slipped off his coat, flung it to the remonstrant Colonel Spillington, and had begun to climb the iron balconies, just as Boldwood had climbed, but at a greater disadvantage, for the smoke and flame had intensified with every moment; window after window had shivered, and vomited fire. The lookers-on, those who were not too absorbed by their thoughts of the dead to watch the livin[illegible], gave a cry of horror—horror at the madness of such an attempt.

But in a few minutes those spectators understood that this climber was of a different calibre from Boldwood. This slight, slim form was the figure of a trained athlete. Those long lithe arms held on to the balconies, and wreathed themselves about the iron columns with the suppleness and the tenacity of a serpent. Could this be the man with the crooked back, who had been standing in the front of the crowd just now, silent, watchful?

Some of them recognised him by that marred spine, knew him to be Lord Lashmar, a chronic

invalid, a weakling. Others who knew better knew that he had trained himself to the highest feats of athleticism, that he had built a gymnasium at Lashmar Castle, and that he had exercised his body with all the devotion of a Greek wrestler, or a Roman gladiator. To these it was no surprise to see the hunchback's long lean arms lift him from balcony to balcony, to see that well-shaped head thrown back to escape the suffocating rush of smoke and fiery dust, to see railing after railing gained, as that stunted figure mounted higher, diminishing almost to a vanishing point. Yes, *he* will do it! That which Jonathan Goldwood—deteriorated by intemperate habits and a sedentary life, hindered by his own bulk—had been unable to accomplish, this deformed lordling would do. Would do? He had done it. That sinuous right arm was wreathed round the iron column between the fourth story and the balcony above. A mighty cheer swelled from the throats of the crowd—a cheer that was half a sob.

'Bring round the fire-escapes!' shouted one man, and there was a rush to the other side of the building. Lives were being saved there as fast as the firemen could save them—young children, helpless old people, sick, and maimed. But here was a life more precious than them all—the life of the deliverer, the hero, the Hercules who had entered himself, a voluntary combatant, in a hand-to-hand fight with death.

Would he perish in his generous endeavour? That was the awful doubt which thrilled every heart in that watching crowd. Even Rachel weeping for her children, stilled her wailings for the moment, to look up with strained eyes and love-stricken face towards that upper balcony within which the deliverer had disappeared.

What fate awaited him in the darkness and the fire? Was the room he had entered sound and whole, or was it but the mouth of a fiery pit? Was that generous heart stilled in death, even while they watched and waited?

No; just as the fire-escape appeared round the corner of the building, swaying to and fro as the firemen and the crowd steered it along, just as succour drew near, that slim figure in the white shirt sleeves flashed out again amidst the smoke. Lord Lashmar was standing in that fourth floor balcony with a child in his arms. He had but to wait the adjustment of the escape, to guard himself and his living burden from the flames, and all the rest was easy.

Five, ten minutes of supreme anxiety, and all was over. Lashmar was standing among the crowd with Boldwood's five-year-old daughter in his arms, a small, thin figure in a little white nightgown, a sallow, wizened little face, with great goblin eyes.

'God bless you, sir; God bless you, my lord.'

The men clasped him by the hand, the women hung about him, and kissed those wounded hands of his, raw and bleeding, scratched and scorched and torn, and smelling of smoke and fire. No thought of Radical or Conservative now; no fierce hatred of landowner and aristocrat. The great heart of the crowd was stirred with one divine impulse, made up of love, pity, tenderness—unselfish delight in a generous act nobly done.

'By Jove, Lashmar, I thought you were a dead man!' cried Colonel Spillington. 'You must be hurt, surely; dangerously hurt perhaps,' he added, running his hand over the young man's shoulder and arm, as if in search of broken bones.

'A few scratches more or less,' answered

Lashmar quietly; and then he added to the crowd: 'Don't make such a fuss, my good friends; I'm sure there isn't one of you that wouldn't have done as much.'

He made his way through the throng towards the farther side of the broad barren road where he had left the cab, with the rescued child still in his arms, clinging to him, scared and pale, with those wide goblin eyes of hers. Spillington followed him closely.

'What are you going to do with the child?' he asked. 'She'll have to go to the Union, I suppose, poor little soul!'

'She'll have to go to no such place,' answered Lashmar; 'she is going to my house.'

'You mean to take Boldwood's child to Lashmar Castle?' asked Spillington, astounded.

'Why not? I should take a stray dog home. Why should I draw the line at a stray child?'

'Well, there's a considerable difference, I believe, though you may not see it. To take a Radical orphan upon one's hands is rather a serious business. If I were you I should drive straight to the Union, and deposit this poor little thing with the matron; much the best thing you can do for her.'

'I have saved her out of the fire, I am not going to throw her back into it,' answered Lashmar resolutely. 'She is mine, jetsam and flotsam from the great ship Fate; my prize, my portion. She shall never cross the threshold of a workhouse while I have power to prevent it.'

They were in the cab by this time. Lashmar had wrapped his coat round the child, and was sitting in his shirt-sleeves. He told the man to drive to the George, the chief hotel in Brumm,

the hotel patronised by the county people, when they gladdened the great grimy town with their superior presence. It was an old-fashioned hotel, with a wide archway, and a spacious courtyard, and a magpie in a cage by the little low doorway of the bar. It had been an old-established hotel in the coaching days, before ever Brumm had arisen in its grimy might as a manufacturing town.

Lord Lashmar was known and honoured at the George. The sleepy waiters stifled their yawns, and bowed themselves before him. The landlady, who had lingered over her supper in the snug little parlour behind the bar, waiting up to hear the latest news of the fire, came bustling out to see if she could be of any use to his lordship.

She almost shrieked at the sight of the child looking round with frightened eyes; such a poor little pinched, sallow countenance, so wizened, so unchildlike. The mistress of the George thought she had never seen an uglier brat.

'Oh! my Lord, where did you pick her up? Is she one of the children from Goldwin's?'

'She is Boldwood's child, and his lordship risked his life to save her,' answered Spillington. 'What will you have, Lashmar, by way of pick-me-up? A brandy-and-soda—a tumbler of champagne, eh? You must have something!'

'I'll take some soda, with a dash of brandy if you like,' said Lashmar. 'Do you think you could lend me a shawl to wrap up this little one, Mrs. Sycamour?' he asked the obsequious landlady; 'and do you think you could get me a pair of horses to take us back to Lashmar? Her ladyship will be anxious till she sees us all safe at home.'

'Certainly, my Lord'—and Mrs. Sycamour rang a bell: 'Tell Joe to get the landau and the grays

ready directly. And, Mary, run and fetch one of my shawls. The warm knitted one in the bottom drawer, you know, child. Don't stand staring like a simpleton.'

Mary was gazing at the dark-eyed child in Lord Lashmar's arms. A child in a nightgown was a curious kind of thing for a young nobleman to carry about with him at midnight.

'Daddy!' cried the little girl piteously, and the great dark eyes began to fill with tears. 'Where's daddy? I want my daddy.'

Lashmar looked at her helplessly. What could he say to soothe or console, without uttering a deliberate lie? The little one's breast began to heave with sobs.

'Daddy!' she cried, 'where's daddy? Was he burnt in the fire—was he hurt? Let me go to daddy.'

'By-and-by,' murmured Lashmar, feebly; 'by-and-by, dear child. Will you give her a little milk and a biscuit, Mrs. Sycamour? The poor little thing may be hungry.'

'Poor little dear,' said the landlady. 'Have a nice cake, pet? Mary, bring me a glass of milk, and a sponge cake.'

But when the motherly soul attempted to take the child in her arms, the little one scowled and clung tighter to Lashmar.

'Take me to daddy,' she pleaded, frowning darkly at Mrs. Sycamour's friendly face, rejecting all tenderness from that source.

'Upon my soul, Lord Lashmar, this is too much of a good thing,' cried Spillington, who had finished his brandy-and-soda, and was waxing impatient to be gone. For a man who had not dined this indefinite postponement of supper was a trial. 'You had better let our good friend here take

charge of the brat for to-night, and hand her over to the proper authorities to-morrow. I never saw such a goblin. Why, she's as dark as Erebus. There must have been a dip of the tar-brush somewhere.'

'It's the gipsy blood, sir; everybody says that Boldwood's wife was a gipsy.'

'Is that carriage ready,' asked Lashmar.

The landlady blew down a speaking-tube which communicated with the stables. Mysterious sounds followed, as of voices from spirit land.

'In five minutes, my Lord.'

Mary—no less a person than the head chambermaid—had brought the milk and cake by this time, and Lashmar tried to coax the child to eat and drink. In vain! She only wept, and pushed aside his gentle hand.

'Where's my daddy?' she asked hopelessly.

Lashmar huddled her up in the shawl, and carried her off to the landau, one of those capacious vehicles peculiar to country inns, and seemingly built to hold eight inside. It was very leathery, but not uncomfortable. Colonel Spillington buttoned his light overcoat across his chest, and composed himself in a corner.

'If that brat will only let me sleep, now,' he thought, and Providence was kind to him, for before they had left the stones of Brumm far behind them Boldwood's daughter had sobbed herself to sleep upon Lord Lashmar's breast, and the Colonel was able to snore in peace.

Not once did slumber visit Lashmar's eyes during that long drive under the summer stars. He was thinking of that dead face, convulsed by the shock that snapped the cervical vertebræ and crushed one side of the skull—that dark powerful face in which every line indicated the double forces of a strong mind in a strong body. And this man

who had been so potent an influence in that great hive of workers yonder, this daring speaker, this audacious thinker, the man who blasphemed his Maker and hated his more fortunate fellow-man, was gone for ever—a mere lump of clay now, to be buried out of sight, and forgotten.

All the Radicals and Freethinkers of Brumm would deplore the agitator: but perhaps there was only this one helpless little being, this five-year-old child, to mourn for the man.

And he had been a gentleman once! What dark experiences, what temptations, errors, misfortunes, lay between that triumphant hour of the Oxford undergraduate, and the dreadful death of the Brumm brass-worker? Lashmar's reading had taught him that most men's misfortunes are in some degree of their own work: and he could but think that this brass-worker must have sinned against God or society before he took to himself the fustian coat and the fustian creed of the Brumm demagogue.

It was past one o'clock when the grays from the George trotted along the avenue that led to Lashmar Castle. The river was gleaming in the starlight, mysterious, beautiful, between its rushy banks, its leaning willows; and the casements of the castle gleamed also, with an earthlier radiance, and the low Gothic doors stood open under the massive stone porch, revealing the lighted hall within. Lady Lashmar and Victorian came out of the white parlour as the carriage stopped.

'My dear Colonel, I thought you were never coming back!' she exclaimed. 'How dreadfully you must want your supper;' and then starting at sight of Lashmar's burden—the little figure muffled in a red fleecy shawl—she exclaimed, 'Why, Lashmar, what in Heaven's name have you there?'

'A child, madam; an imp of darkness: the spawn of the demagogue—Boldwood's child, rescued from the flames by this young hero of yours.' By Jove, Lady Lashmar, you have reason to be proud of your son,' said the Colonel, collecting his senses with an effort, for he had been in the middle of his first and soundest sleep when the carriage pulled up.

'*You* rescued Boldwood's child!' cried her ladyship, looking at Lashmar's smoke-grimed face, and from his face downward to his nether garments, which were torn and frayed at the knees, one knee rent across, and showing blood-stains on the light summer cloth. 'But how?'

'By climbing to the top of a four-story building—one of the most heroic acts I ever saw anywhere, except before the walls of a hill fort,' answered the Colonel. 'It's a wonder I've brought him back to you alive, Lady Lashmar.'

'The Lashmars were always brave!' she said gravely; and then, with a certain formality which chilled the Colonel's soul, she kissed her stepson on the forehead.

'You had no right to risk your life for a demagogue's brat,' she said. 'Why could not Mr. Boldwood rescue his child himself?'

'He did his damnedest, I beg pardon, he did his uttermost, poor beggar, and was killed in the attempt,' said the Colonel.

'Boldwood killed?'

'Yes; he will trouble us no more, mother. He is gone—and this is his orphan daughter.'

'But why in mercy's name did you bring her here? Why not at once hand her over to the proper people?'

'That was precisely my idea,' said the Colonel, longing for his supper.

The white parlour looked so bright and homelike and cheery, in the light of a large swinging colza lamp, under a yellow umbrella-shaped shade. The table was loaded with good things. The red Bordeaux wine glowed in thinnest Venetian flasks. Butler and footman were in attendance by the sideboard, and there was an odour of savoury viands from a chafing-dish, which encouraged the Colonel with the hope of at least a hot cutlet or sweetbread, if this discussion about the beggar's brat in Lashmar's arms would only come to a close.

'Pray, who are the proper people to whom a five-year-old orphan should be handed over?' asked Lashmar deliberately.

'Why, the matron at the Union would of course be the proper person to take care of her.'

'Exactly what I told Lord Lashmar,' said the Colonel.

'And you would have her begin her life in a workhouse—be reared and educated as a pauper?'

'And properly trained for domestic service,' pursued her ladyship; 'the very best career for any young woman. Do you know, Colonel Spillington, that I pay my third and fourth housemaids twenty pounds a-year, which their innumerable perquisites must increase to thirty. The very best and most comfortable career for any young woman, Lashmar; and our workhouses nowadays are so thoroughly well administered that I have not the least objection to take a servant from the pauper class. Some of our best girls have come from the Union.'

'This child will not go to the Union while I live,' answered Lashmar, with quiet determination. 'Are any of the women up, Longley?'

'Only her ladyship's maids,' my Lord.

Her ladyship had two personal attendants. She required very little service from them, for she was a woman of active habits, and by no means self-indulgent. But this dual service was an appanage of her state; it was her pride not her luxuriousness which demanded to be waited upon.

'Will you allow me to ask a favour of Barker?' asked Lord Lashmar.

'Certainly!'

Barker was the second and homelier maid. A homely-looking person of five-and-thirty, who lighted the candles and arranged the furniture—sometimes even condescended so far as to use a duster—in Lady Lashmar's private apartments.

Barker was summoned, and came [illegible]y but smiling to await her ladyship's orders.

'I believe his lordship wishes you to take care of a child, Barker,' said Lady Lashmar. 'You will have to put it in your own bed for to-night, I suppose, after you have given it a hot bath. You had better cut its hair, too, as close as you possibly can.'

'The child has not had scarlet fever, mother.'

'Who knows? Poor people are always having fevers. At any rate, it is most likely very dirty. Bathe it and crop it, Barker, I beg.'

The shawl fell off as Lashmar handed the child to Barker, and the little white nightgown and little bare feet were the best answer to her ladyship's sweeping conclusion. Both were spotlessly clean.

'What an ugly child!' cried Lady Lashmar; and then seeing Colonel Spillington standing forlorn, gazing at the supper table yonder, she took pity upon him.

'Take the child away, and make her as comfortable as you can, Barker,' she said. 'And

now let me give you both some supper. Poor creatures, you must be dreadfully hungry!'

'I confess to feeling a vacuum,' said the Colonel, growing cheerful, as he seated himself at the table and unfolded his napkin, looking about him with an interested air.

Lobster mayonaise, chicken aspic, Russian salad with plenty of stuffed olives—hum, ha, pretty tiny kickshaws—and the footman put a hot cutlet, *à l'Indienne*, before him; while the butler unwired a bottle of De Lossey's dry champagne. Not so bad after all.

'Lashmar, did you really climb a four-story balcony? I know Goldwin's—iron balconies all the way up, like a gridiron. I daresay I could do it myself; but it must have been deuced difficult. I envy you!'

'I hope you may never have the opportunity or the inclination to attempt anything half so wild,' said Lady Lashmar, in a biting voice.

It was the first time she had given utterance to her exasperation; but the pallor of her fine features, the angry light in her eyes, had indicated the state of her feelings from the moment she had seen Boldwood's child in her stepson's arms. She was wise enough to hold her peace, however. Lashmar Castle was the house of Lord Lashmar, and she, omnipotent although she seemed to the household and the neighbours, was only there on sufferance. If Lashmar chose to bring a pauper brat into the castle, to rear her there, as he might any other domestic pet, it was not for her ladyship to interfere. This consciousness of her own impotence intensified her displeasure.

'Victor, you ought to have been in bed hours ago!' she exclaimed. 'Good-night, Colonel

Spillington, or good morning rather. I will leave you and Lashmar to take care of each other.'

She shook hands with the Colonel, kissed her stepson's brow, and went away with her arm round her boy's neck.

'What a glorious fellow Lashmar is!' said Victorian, as he and his mother went upstairs. 'So quiet, so unassuming, and so plucky. I wish—I wish his back was as straight as other people's, poor chap! He bears his burden so well.'

'I wish he were sane,' retorted her ladyship, 'and then he would not have brought home that Radical's imp.'

'Oh! but if he likes to provide for the little thing, send her to some cheap school, or some institution—orphanage—don't you know; he is rich enough to indulge his benevolence.'

Lord Lashmar did not send the Radical's child to a cheap school; nor did he plague the souls of his friends by canvassing for votes in order to get Stella Boldwood elected as an inmate of some stately orphanage, supported by voluntary contributions, and smiled upon by princes and princesses. Stella was not destined to dwell in one of those vast edifices which philanthropy has reared for the shelter of the friendless and the orphan. It was Stella's fate to be reared in the home of an English nobleman, and to become accustomed to all those luxuries and elegancies which are, as it were, the surrounding atmosphere of those born in the purple.

It was in vain that the great Lady Pitland's daughter protested against her stepson's folly in adopting a pauper's brat, and hinted that the cloven foot of Socialism showed itself in the act. It was in vain that she shuddered at the degrada-

tion of those ancestral halls. Lashmar was rock. He was one of those quiet, undemonstrative young men who make up their minds slowly, and who can never be argued or cajoled into the relinquishment of a settled purpose.

'I made up my mind as we drove home last night, mother,' said Lashmar, gently, gravely, resolutely, in a tone which her ladyship knew only too well. 'Spillington and the child were both asleep. I had ample time for reflection; and I thought the matter out thoroughly. I mean to adopt Boldwood's child, and to bring her up as my own daughter. There are many reasons in favour of my project; there is not one that I can discover against it. I have long wished for something to love, some young unschooled creature, that should be dependent upon me, and should grow up at my feet, as it were. I am very fond of Victorian; but he can seldom be my companion. He has his education to occupy him now; he will have his career to think of by-and-by. But a friendless little girl, whom I can train and educate into companionship, will afford me just the kind of solace, just the kind of innocent sympathy, which I have sighed for. A little more than a dog, a little less than an equal.'

'You will find the creature a horrible nuisance before you have done with her. If you should think of marrying, for instance.'

'I shall never marry, never have children of my own. By the time this girl has grown up I shall be declining into the vale of years. She will be my link with the future. I have been told lately—you remember my long chat with Sir William Spenser the last time he came down to see me—that in spite of my miserable health I may live to be an old man.'

Lady Lashmar winced palpably; but she was sitting at some distance from her stepson, and her face was turned to the window, so he did not see that startled look of keenest pain. She had been telling herself for years past that Hubert Lashmar could not make old bones—that it could only be a question of a few years more or less before her son would fill his place—and now to be told that the great physician, Sir William Spenser, had declared that Lashmar might creep on in this half-life of his to old age! It was a hard thing to be told this, suddenly, in that cool, calm voice of her stepson's. She knew that he was the soul of truth, incapable of misrepresentation or exaggeration upon any subject whatever.

'And you look to the child of such a man as Boldwood to be your friend and companion in after years—the mongrel of a gipsy and a demagogue!' exclaimed Lady Lashmar, unable to control her temper. 'You make no allowance for hereditary instincts.'

'I believe more in association and education than in hereditary instinct. The child has a fine broad forehead, bright well-opened eyes, sensitive nostrils, thin lips, delicate chin—not at all a bad subject to work upon.'

'I really think she is the ugliest child I ever beheld,' said Lady Lashmar, rapping the table with an elephant's tusk paper-knife. 'How you, who pretend to worship ideal beauty, can be interested in such a little monster is more than I can understand.'

'She is small and brown, but I don't think her ugly. Her eyes shone like stars last night. It is my idea that she will grow up a very interesting woman.'

'You have such odd ideas!'

'Don't be angry, mother,' pleaded Lashmar,

with wondrous gentleness. 'Granted that I am somewhat eccentric—Nature has made me in a mould of her own, you see—but, after all, I have very few whims. And I promise you that this last caprice of mine shall give you no trouble. The child shall live in this house; but you need hardly be aware of her existence. All she will want will be a couple of rooms on the top story, where we have a score of rooms that only serve as a rat-warren.'

'Mice, not rats,' protested her ladyship.

'Well, we'll call them mice. It sounds pleasanter; only they are the biggest breed I ever saw, and the noisiest. However, my *protégée* will help to scare away the mice. I shall engage a maid for her, and arrange a couple of rooms for her and her maid, those two pretty rooms in the south-west tower for instance. She will live on that top floor, have her meals there, plague no one; and when I want her company in my study I can have her brought down to me as I would any other plaything. You may meet her on the stairs or in the corridor occasionally. But that is about the utmost you need see of her.'

'This is your house, Lashmar. If you choose to have it infested by the spawn of Socialism it is not for me to gainsay you.'

'I hope the day may come when you will be reconciled to my adopted daughter; when she may perhaps be a comfort to you as well as to me.'

'Never, Lashmar! I can tolerate her existence in the house out of deference to you. I should have to submit if you took it into your head to keep a rattlesnake; but I have none of your Utopian ideas; and I have not the least doubt that you will have cause to repent your generous folly before you and your *protégée* are three years older.'

'We will compare notes three years hence, and I hope I shall convince you that you were mistaken,' said Lashmar, with perfect good temper. 'And now, mother, have you any young woman on your list who would make a good maid for Stella?'

'There is Barker's niece; her father is in the gardens, don't you know. Barker's niece has been wanting to come here for the last six months.'

'I should like to see Barker's niece this afternoon.'

Lady Lashmar sighed, and gave orders in accordance with her stepson's wish. She had not seen the obnoxious orphan since the previous night. The child had been in Barker's care, and had been provided for in the remoteness of the upper servants' apartments. She had been taken to Lord Lashmar, and had spent half-an-hour in his study, before breakfast.

The intruder did not take kindly to her new life. Again and again, with piteous tears, and childish unreasoning iteration, she entreated to be taken to her father 'Where is daddy? Take me to daddy!' that was the burden of her cries. And Lashmar, albeit philosophical and strong-minded in most things, could not find it in his heart to tell this orphan child the hard and bitter truth. He could not bring himself to crush her with the word 'never.' Childhood so soon learns the meaning of that fatal word. So with weak tenderness he took the little girl upon his lap, and drew her to his breast, and told her that she should see her father again, some day.

'To-day? Now?' she questioned.

'No, dear; not now—not to-day. He has gone on a long journey.'

'To London?' she asked.

'A longer journey than that.'

'Where?'

'To a beautiful country. You shall go there some day, and you shall be with him again.'

'Let me go now.'

'No, dear; not yet.'

'But I *will* go,' cried the child, scrambling off Lashmar's lap, and running towards the door.

Lashmar followed and stopped her; she cried, and stormed, and struggled with him.

'I want to go to my daddy; I will go to my daddy.'

He was a quarter of an hour soothing her, and arguing with her. By the end of that time he had begun to exercise a certain influence over her; she was content to sit on his knee, gazing at him with those great dark eyes—star-like eyes, as he had called them. She listened, and seemed comforted.

'Tell me your name, little one,' he asked.

'Stella.'

'Stella! That is a very pretty name.'

'It means a star!' said the child. 'Daddy told me.'

'Will you be my star? Will you live with me in this house, and play in those gardens out there, and go in my boat on the river?'

The little one craned her neck and looked out of the broad Tudor window at the flower garden and the green slopes of the park, and the bright blue water in the valley yonder. It was a lovely landscape—passing lovely after the arid purlieus of Brumm, to which those young eyes had grown accustomed.

'No,' said the little one firmly, after she had contemplated that delicious picture for some moments. 'I don't want to live with you, I want to live with my daddy.'

And then with a divinity of patience, with that exquisite gentleness which is a peculiar attribute of those who love little children, Lashmar explained how the journey on which daddy had gone must needs last for a long time, how summer and winter must pass before he could come back, or Stella go to him; but how they should meet in the days to come.

'And you will leave off crying, and be very good, for his sake, won't you, Stella?' pleaded Lashmar. 'Fathers are unhappy when they hear that their children have been naughty. You will be good, and you will try to love me, won't you, Stella, for daddy's sake?'

The child made a supreme effort over her childish heart, choked her sobs and dried her tears, and trotted by Lashmar's side to the gardens, and across the dewy park to the river. He took her in his boat, and rowed about with her for half-an-hour or so, and took her back to the castle with a faint bloom in her sallow cheeks, and a fine appetite for breakfast, as Barker informed him afterwards.

He saw Barker's niece after luncheon, and found her a buxom, chubby-cheeked young woman with a fine honest countenance; so he engaged her at once to be Stella's special attendant.

The little girl was to be known only as Stella. That obnoxious name Boldwood were well forgotten. And then with Barker for his aid and counsellor, Lord Lashmar ordered the arrangement of those two rooms in the south-west tower, remote from the end of the castle where Lady Lashmar's sumptuous apartments were situated, and on a higher floor; so that the chances of the young voice or the young presence obtruding themselves on her ladyship were minimised.

One of the two rooms was to be furnished as a sitting-room; the other and inner chamber was to contain two beds, for nurse and child. There was a plethora of substantial old-fashioned furniture upon this upper floor; so the re-furnishing of the rooms was only a matter of adjustment. The view from these tower-chambers was exquisite. A wide expanse of wooded park and winding river bounded by low hills, and in the distance the rustic village of Avondale, with red-tiled roofs, and low thatched cottages, and quaint variety of gables, and Norman church tower, smiling amidst rich pastures, glassing its simple beauties in the blue bright river. For a rural English Midland landscape nothing could be prettier.

'She ought to thrive and flourish in such a bower as this,' thought Lashmar, and then he gave Barker's niece—in future to be known as Betsy—some broad general instructions as to the bringing up of childhood upon enlightened principles—cold water, fresh air, regular meals, and good and ample food being the chief points. And to the elder Barker he entrusted the task of procuring the child an outfit. She might be driven over to Brumm that afternoon he suggested, and could make all her purchases before the shops were shut, if her ladyship would kindly dispense with her services for a few hours.

'I think I can manage to arrange that with Celestine,' said Barker.

Celestine was the Parisian and superior maid who re-arranged Mrs. Monsoon's gowns, and repaired her ladyship's priceless laces.

'Do, like a good soul; and be sure you thank the coachman's wife for lending the little one clothes for to-day. You will please buy everything of the best, but of the simplest. When she is a year or

two older I may choose her frocks myself, perhaps. For the present I should like her to be dressed always in some cream-coloured stuff—some kind of soft woollen material, and then she need have very few undergarments, and no weight of clothing to impede her movements.'

'Lord a 'mercy, what a mollycoddle!' thought Barker, and then she ventured a remonstrance on economical grounds.

'Cream colour so soon gets dirty, my Lord,' she said; 'don't you think now that a neat lilac print, a small pattern, and rather dark, would be better?'

'Good heavens, no! Do you suppose I want her to look like a workhouse child? I want her to brighten the gardens by her presence, like a beautiful human butterfly.'

'She is such a plain child, my Lord. She will never pay for dress.'

'I will have her in cream colour,' said Lashmar, decisively; 'and you can buy her half-a-dozen sashes, the broadest you can get—some scarlet and some pale blue. I will write you a cheque for twenty or thirty pounds before you go. Buy everything at Ponsford's, where her ladyship deals.'

'The dearest shop in Brumm, my Lord.'

'The dearest shops are apt to be the cheapest in the long run.'

'Ten pounds ought to be ample, even at Ponsford's,' said Barker. 'I shall only have to buy materials, for Betsy is very clever with her needle, and she will make all the little frocks and things.'

Betsy grinned, and reddened at this praise.

'What a capital Betsy!' exclaimed Lashmar. 'I shall make the cheque twenty, and be sure you buy soft and fine stuffs; I want my little girl to look pretty.'

'That she will never do, my Lord,' answered Barker with conviction; 'but me and Betsy will do our best to make her look nice.'

CHAPTER V

'BY DEGREES THE HUMAN BLOSSOM BLOWS'

THE inquest upon Jonathan Boldwood was held next day, and Lord Lashmar was present. There were plenty of witnesses ready to describe his fall, had more than one voice been necessary. The firemen were exempted from all blame; they had been working nobly on the other side of the building—not one inhabitant had perished in that great populous hive. The one fatal accident had been the death of the father in his endeavour to rescue his child.

No one came forward out of Boldwood's past life to tell what the man had been, or to testify to their interest in him. When the coroner asked what had been done with the child, Lord Lashmar stepped forward and said that he had adopted her, and would hold himself responsible for her future welfare.

'I don't think there is anyone who will dispute that privilege with you, my Lord,' said the coroner. 'I hope the child will grow up to be grateful to you for your noble conduct in saving her life.'

There was a murmur of applause in the room as Lord Lashmar withdrew; but before he left the tavern where the inquest had been held, he told the authorities that he would pay for a decent

funeral, and a grave in the cemetery outside Brumm. It was his particular desire that Boldwood should not be buried by the parish.

He attended the funeral in person two days afterwards, by no means an agreeable duty, since all the rabble of Brumm turned out to do honour to their favourite agitator. But Lashmar told himself that the day would come when Stella would question him about her father's burial, would ask to be taken to her father's grave: and he wanted to be able to tell her that he had stood beside that grave while the clods of earth were cast upon the coffin, while the words of promise and of hope were spoken.

So Lashmar stood beside the parson as he shuffled over those sublime words, and his was the first hand that dropped flowers—summer's whitest roses—upon the demagogue's coffin. The crowd pressed forward to stare down into the grave, and many a grimy hand scattered hedgerow wildlings and humble cottage flowers on the lid of the huge oak coffin. There were women among the crowd who wept, women who had never heard the orator, but who felt as if they had lost a friend. Had he not pleaded the cause of the poor against the rich? Had he not given voice to that deep undertone of discontent which had been growing stronger day by day with the advance of education.

The last of the summer roses had bloomed and faded long before Stella ceased from piteous entreaties to be taken to her daddy. She was gentle and obedient to her benefactor; was gradually growing attached to him. She took pleasure in his society, loved the river and the gardens, the meadows and flowery banks, the picture books in the library, where she used to sit upon the floor quietly turning the leaves of

an illustrated volume, while Lashmar read or wrote, undisturbed by her presence. She thrived in Betsy Barker's care, and was happy in the comfort and the brightness of her new life; but young as she was she did not forget. A cloud would come over her face in the midst of her happiness, and the tears would roll down her cheeks as she asked, 'Will daddy *never* come?' Sometimes Lashmar regretted that he had not told her the truth at the very first, and questioned his own wisdom in not having striven to make her young mind comprehend the meaning of that dreadful word 'death.' But having deceived her so long he could not undeceive her now. He could but talk in his vague poetic way of that bright and beautiful country in which they were all to dwell together some day.

Once she asked the name of that distant land, and he told her it was Jerusalem the Golden.

Never did she see a stranger in the house or the gardens without running up to him, looking up in his face interrogatively, lest by any chance this should be 'daddy' come back to her unawares. The vision of a tall man, with broad shoulders, resulted inevitably in bitterest disappointment. The figure seen from a distance, perchance, had looked so like daddy, she had run to him, and caught hold of his coat-tails calling him by that dear name. And, oh! the agony of seeing an unfamiliar face, looking wonderingly down at her!

She had cried herself to sleep more than once after such a disappointment as this.

She was a very intelligent child, grave beyond her years, full of serious thoughts and curious questionings—a young mind alive with wonder. She wanted to know about the sun and moon

and stars, the earth, and all creatures that dwell thereon. Those picture books afforded perpetual subjects for wonder. They were the stepping-stones to knowledge of all things great and small, from the relics of Agamemnon's tomb to the last discovery about ants or aphids. Lashmar was infinitely patient with this human plaything of his. He would lay aside Plato to answer Stella's childish questioning, to explain a picture, to tell her a story. He, to whom books were life itself —the charm and rapture of existence—would shut his best-loved author, and devote himself for an hour at a time to the task of satisfying this eager young mind, impatient with the intensity of its desire for knowledge.

Boldwood had taught his child a great deal, had talked to her of subjects far beyond her years. He had taught her as a man of large brain and lazy habits would be likely to teach. He had taken her on his lap and talked to her at random, roaming from subject to subject; now telling her some legend of the old Greek fairyland, and now some strange fact about the manners and customs of crocodiles. There was one subject which he had never touched upon—he had told her nothing about her God. It was left for Lashmar to teach her to pray. That first simple form of prayer which he had learnt years ago from his nursery governess came back to his memory one evening when the child was bidding him good-night in the summer dusk.

'Stella, I hope you say your prayers beside your little bed, every night and morning,' he said.

'What are prayers?' she asked. 'Betsy said I ought to say my prayers; but I don't know what it means.'

'Did daddy never teach you to pray, Stella?

She shook her head.

'If it was good he would have taught me,' she said; 'he was always good to Stella.'

'Prayer is good for all of us, dear. Daddy may have thought you too young to pray—too young to understand about the God who created you and all of us, and Whom we all ought to love and to fear.'

'Daddy said there was no God; he said only fools believed in God.'

'My little girl, if we want to be happy we must have something higher and better than ourselves to look up to. We want the consciousness of a friend and protector watching over us and caring for us. Happily most of us have that consciousness: it is born with us, a part of our being; takes strange and various forms in different lands, but is always the same instinct—a looking upward.'

And then feeling that his words were outside the child's comprehension, he drew her to his breast, and told her the story of Jesus; told her that sweet story in its simplest and most human phase—the Holy Child on His mother's knee; the baptism in the river; the Spirit of God descending from the parted skies in the form of a dove; the Man of Sorrows; the story of the cross and the grave.

The child listened, her eyes wide with wonder.

'Daddy did not know, or he would have loved Jesus,' she said.

And then Lashmar taught her the first four lines of that childish prayer which he had learnt from his governess three-and-twenty years before: 'Gentle Jesus, meek and mild, look upon a little child.'

Stella repeated the words after him in her clear, sweet tones; the first prayer those lips had

ever syllabled. Other prayers followed, the Lord's prayer first and chiefest—and Betsy's conscience was relieved of a burden.

Stella had lived nearly a month at the castle before she encountered Lady Lashmar. The dowager had gone up to London with Victorian and taken him to Eton, and had spent a week at Windsor in order to soften the agony of parting with her idol. She saw him in the playing fields, she saw him on the river, and his young beauty seemed to her the perfection of ripening manhood. She talked to him of his future—his career—emphasising the word with heroic meaning, trying to kindle the fire of ambition in that young mind.

'As a younger son you are bound to distinguish yourself, Victor,' she said. 'Your poor brother is Lord Lashmar, he can afford to dream away his days in a library, but you will have no distinction except that which you may win for yourself. You must be the architect of your own fortunes.'

'I wouldn't much mind being the architect,' said Victor; 'but I don't want to be the builder—not to have to lay brick upon brick, and carry the hod of mortar, don't you know—not to have to work my way upward inch by inch, as some poor beggars do, in the church, or in the law.'

'You need have no profession but politics.'

'That's deuced slow work, and deuced hard work, I'm told. One has to drudge over blue books, and cram statistics, and sit in the House on summer afternoons to ask questions, when life and fashion are at floodtide outside. If I could make a great speech now, upon some burning question, at midnight, and wake next morning to find myself famous!'

'Ah, that is the way with boys, they want to succeed without working for success!'

'Mother,' said the boy, coming closer to her and lowering his voice, 'do you know some of the fellows here have told me that I should be a fool to work, because I *must* be Lord Lashmar before I am many years older. Poor Lash has such shocking bad health, don't you know, and it isn't likely he'll last long.'

'Whoever taught you to think that you will be Lord Lashmar is your worst enemy,' said his mother severely; 'Lashmar suffers a martyrdom from neuralgia, poor fellow, but there is nothing organically wrong. Sir William Spenser told him that he may live to be an old man.'

'I'm glad to hear it,' said the boy, 'for I'm very fond of old Lash. He has always been a good brother to me. As for working, well, I don't like work, who does? but I always try to be top of the tree everywhere, and I shall try to be top of the tree at St. Stephen's, by-and-by. I shall go in for aristocratic radicalism.'

'Victorian!' cried her ladyship, growing pale with horror.

'There's no one succeeds better than your swell Rad. Look at Maupertius, for instance. Who, has got the ear of the House half so well as he has? A man born in the purple makes such a grand effect when he calmly expounds the theories of advanced socialism? I shall go in for the kind of gospel that poor beggar Boldwood preached so eloquently; only I shall be as mild as Maupertius, don't you know, and I shall be the wit of the House. Nothing tells like wit.'

'But wit is one of the few things that cannot be learnt,' said the mother, smiling fondly at her boy's arrogance. 'A man cannot be either a tenor-singer or a wit for the wishing.'

'We shall see,' answered Victorian confidently.

'If I go into the House it will be to make the members laugh—with me, not at me, mother.'

'I would have you full to the brim of ambition,' said her ladyship, kissing the broad strong brow, 'I do not mind your being self-confident—vain, even—so long as you are earnest and industrious.'

This was their parting interview. Lady Lashmar had never so much as hinted at her own hope of her son's succession to his half-brother's honours; and now she breathed not one word of the bitter blow which Spenser's favourable opinion had been to her. She felt now that the hope had been wicked, unnatural: yet she told herself that she had always done her duty to her stepson, and that nothing could ever make her falter in her performance of that duty. If it had pleased Providence to relieve him of the burden of existence, it would have seemed to her that Providence had acted wisely and beneficially alike for Lashmar and for Victorian. But Lady Pitland's second daughter had been too well brought up to be capable of rebellion against Providence. It was not in vain that she went to church twice on Sundays, and once on every Saint's Day, not even slighting the minor saints by non-attendance. She was eminently orthodox in her ideas, and she bowed with dignified submission to the Inscrutable.

She went back to Middleshire, and was cordially received by her stepson, who was at the station to meet her, testifying to that respect which was her due. He was standing on the platform when the train stopped, and her ladyship thought she had never seen him looking so well.

'I shouldn't wonder if Sir William were right. He looks as if he might live to be ninety,' she said to herself, and then, with a sigh, she murmured 'Poor Victorian.'

Orthodox as she was it could but seem to her a hardship that her son, in his strength and perfection of manhood, should be kept in the background by this blighted life.

'How brown you have grown, Lashmar,' she said, as they shook hands, 'and how well you are looking!'

'I have not had one of my headaches since you left. I suppose it is because I have lived more out of doors than I used to do.'

'I should advise you always to live out of doors,' replied his stepmother, with a forced laugh.

She was grave and silent as they drove home; excused herself for being dull and stupid on the ground of fatigue. Not one question did she ask about Lashmar's *protégée*: yet the thought of Boldwood's child was in her mind as they drew near the castle. It was on account of this brat no doubt that Lashmar had been spending his life in the gardens, bronzing himself to the complexion of a plough-boy. It was this whim which had given new brightness to his aspect, a new impetus to his life. Lady Lashmar was far too orthodox to be angry with Providence; but she felt that she might be as angry as she liked with Boldwood's daughter.

She stood upon her balcony next morning, wrapped in her dressing-gown, tasting the sweet freshness of the air that swept over woodland and meadow, and rippled the wavelets of the river yonder. Far away in the rose-garden, a quaint old quadrangle of turf and rose-trees, hedged in with clipped yew, she saw two figures—Lashmar's and a little girl in a white frock. The child was flitting from flower to flower. The man was sauntering up and down the grass, reading but

he looked round every now and then at the child, and occasionally stopped and bent down to talk to her.

Lady Lashmar stood for a long time watching them.

'Was there ever such an absurd infatuation?' she said to herself, contemptuously.

It was nearly a week later when she met the child for the first time in the corridor. Stella was alone, tripping along gaily, holding up a lap full of wild flowers—free, independent, happy. She had just come in from a morning spent on the river, in Lashmar's boat.

Her ladyship laid her hand upon the child's shoulder, and bent down to scrutinise the small sallow face.

Ugly? Well, no, not so ugly as she had thought that night. The small features were too delicately moulded for ugliness. The eyes were wonderful—too large, too dark for childish beauty; but in a woman they would have been eyes worthy of Cleopatra.

'I shouldn't wonder if the creature were to grow up into a handsome woman,' thought her ladyship, 'and then the chances are that Lashmar will marry her. With his eccentric ideas there would be nothing extraordinary in such a marriage. Let me see, she is five—it will be twelve or thirteen years before she is marriageable. That is a comfort. And in the meantime she may hinder his marrying anyone else.'

There was comfort also in this last idea, and yet Lady Lashmar could not bring herself to regard the child as anything but a viper.

'What is your name?' she asked sternly.

'Stella,' answered the child, looking up at her ladyship calmly, unabashed by grandeur of

presence or splendour of raiment, or by the frown which contracted the questioner's dark brows.

'Stella! a fine theatrical name, upon my word. I suppose it was Lashmar who called you Stella.'

'It was my daddy. He called me Stella. Do you know where he is?' looking up eagerly, with sudden interest.

Her ladyship was on the point of replying. In another instant the hard, bitter truth would have been spoken, had not Lashmar come out of the library close by and interrupted the conversation.

'So you have been talking to Stella,' he said cheerily. 'Don't you think she has improved in Betsy's care?'

'Betsy has dressed her a great deal too fine,' said her ladyship, with a scornful glance at the cream-coloured frock and scarlet sash, the scarlet shoes, and the coral necklace on the little throat, which had the yellowish whiteness of ivory.

'Oh, I like her to look pretty! She brings stray gleams of beauty into the dullness of a student's life. There, you can run away, Stella. Run away and get your dinner, and come to me again at four o'clock for your reading lesson. Good-bye till four.'

He stooped to kiss her, and dismissed her with a smile. She tripped away, murmuring 'Four o'clock, four o'clock—go again at four o'clock,' in a kind of tune, as if to impress the fact upon her mind.

Lady Lashmar felt the uselessness of argument with her stepson. That quietly determined temper of his had always baffled her in any dispute which involved earnest purpose on his side. In trifles he was always ready to give way to her. He allowed her to reign undisputed mistress of a house which by inheritance was all his own. He allowed her to spend as much of his money as ever she cared to spend in the maintenance of a state which

was far beyond his desires: but wherever feeling or affection was concerned he had his own way.

Her ladyship had wished to get rid of the old book-worm tutor when Lashmar came of age. The man had taught his pupil all he could teach. He was a shabby-looking Dominie Sampson-ish personage, whose dingy presence was a blot upon the elegance of Lashmar Castle. He was receiving two hundred a year for doing nothing. But when these views of hers were made known to Lashmar he informed her that he meant Gabriel Verner to end his days at the castle.

'Verner is too old to go among new faces or to learn new habits,' he said; 'he will be very useful to me as a librarian and secretary. He can take care of my books and write my business letters.'

'He has no more idea of business than one of those peacocks,' said her ladyship, looking absently out upon the terrace where Juno's birds were spreading their plumes in the sunshine.

'Fortunately *I* have. I can always tell him what to say.'

So Gabriel Verner stayed, a quaint old figure, with shoulders so bent and rounded by stooping over books that he too seemed a hunchback. Lady Lashmar sometimes thought that he had cultivated a hump, by way of mute flattery. He was a harmless old man, small and pale, with a large overhanging brow, and silvery hair, which he wore long, like Milton, to whom he fancied that he bore a striking resemblance. He had an inoffensive kind of intellectual vanity, and was engaged upon an elaborate commentary on Aristotle's metaphysics, which he feared to publish lest he should become suddenly famous in the decline of his life, and sink into the grave crushed by the weight of his laurels, like Tarpeia

under the bracelets of the besiegers. He contrived to live at the castle, without obtruding himself upon its proud mistress. He had his private sitting-room near the library, where he dwelt alone when he was not with Lashmar. Once in a way, when she was in a benevolent mood, Lady Lashmar invited him to lunch; or, if she had a learned visitor she would go so far as to ask Mr. Verner to dinner, in order that he might relieve her of her burden, and do all necessary listening and sympathising in her stead. Gradually she had become resigned to the idea that he was to end his days at Lashmar. She even knitted warm comforters for him, which he used to wear, and speak of with reverence as 'her ladyship's little attentions.'

It was to Gabriel Verner that Lady Lashmar now turned for sympathy. She joined him on the terrace that afternoon while he was taking his constitutional walk, after his temperate luncheon, trotting up and down with a volume of German metaphysics under his arm, a book to which he applied himself for a few minutes ever and anon, reading a little bit, and then pacing up and down.

'My dear Mr. Verner, how well you are looking!' cried her Ladyship, 'ever so much better than when I left the castle.'

'I think it must be because I have been more in the open air,' replied the old man, unconsciously answering just as Lashmar had answered; 'his lordship and I have been spending our days on the river during the late glorious weather; we have taken our books and our luncheon——'

'And his lordship's latest plaything—that horrid child,' interrupted Lady Lashmar.

'I can assure your ladyship that the little girl is a most amenable child, and a very interesting companion. I never saw so young an intellect of such scope and development; it induces me to think with Aristotle that as in the young of some of the lower mammals the——'

'Of course the child must be sharp, cunning, old-fashioned. She is the child of sedition and freethought. The child of a man whose intellectual powers were employed only in doing mischief. I am not surprised that you should think the child clever. A few years hence she will be a great deal too clever for any of us—a source of unspeakable mischief—unless you, dear Mr. Verner, can exercise your great influence over Lashmar; for you have great influence over him, my dear sir; he positively adores you, and thinks your book will revolutionise European thought.

The phrase was large, but when Lady Lashmar had her own purpose to gain she always did things largely.

'You are too kind,' murmured the Aristotelian meekly.

'Yes, dear Mr. Verner,' she hurried on, 'you must really bring your superior brain to bear upon poor Lashmar. He is clever, but a mere dreamer. You must show him the danger involved in this folly of his—the incubus he is preparing for himself in the future. What in heaven's name is he to do with this child by-and-by if she should turn out badly? And of course she will turn out badly. I have a profound belief in hereditary instinct.'

'And I, dear Lady Lashmar, have an equally profound belief in education. Not for worlds would I thwart Lashmar in this fancy of his. Remember,

he saved that baby's life at the hazard of his own. She is his—a God-given boon. He has seemed ever so much happier since she has been here. She interests, she amuses him, she takes him out of himself; and think what a blessing that self-forgetfulness must needs be in such a case as his where nature, *injusta noverca*, has been so unkind.'

Gabriel Verner stopped in some confusion. What if that phrase, *injusta noverca*, should seem personal. Happily Lady Lashmar had been educated at a period when young ladies were not taught Latin.

'Do not fear the result,' continued Verner 'I will be responsible for the child's training; and I pledge myself that education shall conquer evil instincts, if there is anything evil in that young character.'

Lady Lashmar pushed the argument no further. There was evidently no help to be obtained here.

'I must go and put on my bonnet,' she said rather shortly; 'I have a round of tiresome calls to make. I will leave you to your beloved Plato.'

The Aristotelian shuddered at that hated name. To think that after all these years of intercourse, after having had the nature of his studies and lucubrations so often expounded to her, Lady Lashmar did not yet know to which school he belonged!

For six years of young, fresh life, Stella Boldwood was almost entirely happy. She lived in a world where all things were new — to the dweller in the tents of the people—an actual world of beauty and luxury which knew not change; a world of thought whose horizon widened with every day of her existence. Education to Stella was as sunlight to the flowers, or spring time to the birds. Her eager mind opened to receive the treasures of knowledge; her vivid

imagination shed its own brightness upon every subject; and she was taught as seldom children are taught in this super-enlightened age of ours. She was taught as sweetly and as pleasantly as children are told the legends of fairyland on a mother's knee. Lashmar devised his own system of education. She was to learn nothing in which she was not interested, to repeat no dry formulæ, parrotwise. She was to be troubled with none of those abstruse technicalities which the modern grammarian has devised for the torture of childhood. The story of the earth on which she lived was not to be made odious to her by dry scraps of science, long rows of figures, altitudes of mountains, lengths of rivers. She was to learn the beauty and the glory of the universe unawares, out of picture books and tales of travel and adventure. Instead of knocking her poor little head against a row of unfriendly figures in order to learn the exact height of such and such peaks of the Andes, or the Himalayas, she was in fancy to roam those mountains, to tremble on the edge of stern precipices, to gather strange flowers that bloom in their remoteness, to make acquaintance with strange creatures that dwell in those inaccessible regions. She would sit for hours at Lashmar's feet listening to the experiences of some hardy explorer, and then with her babyish pencil she would draw fancy-pictures of the wild, lonely hills, the gigantic lakes, and awful woods, the world which to her vivid imagination was as familiar as the meadows and orchards of Middleshire.

Lashmar taught his pupil history in a series of narrations, beginning with the Bible-stories of that far-away patriarchal world in which good men dwelt under the personal protection of their God, holding constant converse with heaven; and working gradually downwards through the dark

mystery of Egypt to the fair dawn of Greece. He lingered long and lovingly over that fairy land of Olympus. He was steeped to the lips in Greek legend, Hesiod and Homer, and all the Homeric hymns.

And Stella loved to hear these fair myths of a world that is dead, asked again and again for stories of Dionysus and Demeter, of Helen and Paris, of Hector and Achilles, of Ajax and Agamemnon; stories terrible and stories beautiful, stories at which her hair seemed to rise with horror, stories which brought back the happy smile to the young lips. In the boat beneath the willows on saltriest summer afternoons, or beside the winter fire, betwixt afternoon tea and the eight o'clock dinner, Stella's education was always going on; an education of legend and history, poetry and fact; an education of oral instruction which exacted no labour from the growing brain, an education which was always sowing the seed and never reaping the harvest. *That* was to come later.

Gabriel Verner took the child in hand for an hour every morning. He taught her to read and write and cipher. That was the only drudgery of her education. All the rest was learnt at Lashmar's knee.

Their life crept onward with a monotony which to anyone, except a student, would have been intolerable. Lady Lashmar came and went. She was in Grosvenor Square for the season. She spent all one summer at Homburg for her gout, taking Victorian with her. She took him for another vacation to the Engadine. She spent a month with him in Paris. But, except for an occasional week in the picture-seeing season, Lord Lashmar rarely went to London. He found contentment, occupation, variety in that matchless library which

was the pride of Lashmar Castle; and he found recreation and amusement in the society of his adopted daughter.

And thus, in the lap of luxury, beloved and cherished, Jonathan Boldwood's daughter arrived at her eleventh birthday. She had remembered her birthday, young as she was, and had been able to tell her benefactor the exact date, because it was a day with a name. This dark child with the star-like eyes had begun life upon Midsummer-day.

Lashmar questioned her sometimes about her earliest experiences—very gently, lest he should evoke sad memories, revive her passionate grief for her father, perhaps. He asked her if her father had ever told her anything about her mother, or of his own life.

Yes. He had told her that he was once a gentleman, that he was born in a great house near the sea, far away on the Scottish border. He had told her that her mother was beautiful and ought to have been rich. This—told vaguely as a child would relate shreds and patches of half-remembered speech—was all that Lashmar could obtain by his questioning.

After all, the past history of Jonathan Boldwood could matter very little. There was evidently no one to claim the child; and that, in Lashmar's mind, was the main point.

Only one relic of the dead man had been saved from the fire. A small tin cash-box, with the initials J. B., had been found among the ashes and rubbish below that portion of the ruined pile in which Boldwood's rooms had been situated. It was identified as his by a fellow-lodger; and was ultimately handed over to Lashmar, together with the key which had been found hanging on his steel

watch-chain. Watch, chain, and key, were given up to Lashmar after the inquest.

The contents of the casket were disappointing. It contained papers which the smoke had blackened so as to be utterly undecipherable. The original form was there, but reduced almost to tinder. The matter had vanished. The only uninjured object was a miniature in a double gold case, which had better resisted the action of the fire than the ill-made metal box. The miniature was an old-fashioned painting upon ivory; the portrait of a man in the prime of life. A grave dark face, with large dark eyes, and a high bald forehead. Lashmar judged by the peculiar form of beard and coat-collar that the original had been a foreigner; the type was un-English. He showed Stella the picture and asked her if she had ever seen it before.

'No, never. What was it, who was it?'

Lashmar sealed up the sheets of tindery paper in a large envelope, and subscribed it carefully, 'Burned papers found in Boldwood's cash-box,' with the place and date. He cleaned up the cash-box, and put the miniature and the papers back into it, locked it, and tied the key to the handle then wrote a label, 'This box is Stella Boldwood's property, the only thing saved from her father's lodgings.' He put the box in a locked book-case where he kept some of his most valuable books. A priceless Decameron, an old copy of Rabelais, and some of the least respectable among the classics from the printing press of mediæval Venice.

CHAPTER VI

'OUT OF SIGHT, BEYOND LIGHT, AT WHAT GOAL MAY WE MEET?'

It was Midsummer Day, and Stella was eleven years old, an ever-memorable anniversary in that young life; so sweet in its summer dawn, so fatal before sundown.

Lady Lashmar was in London, Victorian was at Oxford. He had hardly spent three months at the castle during those six years in which Stella had dwelt there, and he had exchanged scarcely a dozen words with her. He had exaggerated his mother's prejudices against the orphan, and avoided her as if she had been a toad.

Lashmar and his *protégée* had their little world all to themselves, save for their devoted slave, Gabriel Verner, who still hovered on the brink of publication, the manuscript of his great book still virgin, unsoiled by the finger-marks of the compositor, and, who still forecast with terror the day in which the world should ring with his name, and cabinet ministers insist upon making his acquaintance.

Stella's birthday had been always made in some wise a festival by her adopted father. He wanted the child to lack none of those childish pleasures which fathers and mothers give their children. She was in after years to recall no deprivation, no loss of privilege or pleasure. And this year he felt more than usually anxious to do

honour to her birthday. The time was drawing near when this happy Arcadian existence, this easy-going education at her benefactor's feet must needs be changed for a more conventional form of life. The time was coming when Stella must be handed over to feminine care, in order that she might learn the ways and the accomplishments of women. It would have pleased Lashmar to have carried out his work to the end, to have seen his *protégée* grow up to ripening womanhood under his care, to have taught her all things that she was ever to learn, to have created in her a spiritual twin-sister, a second self, the sweet companion and consolation of his loveless days. But regard for her interests, the fear that he might create that modern monster, the philosopher in petticoats, made him hesitate; while Gabriel Verner's suggestion, that in days to come scandal might cloud the relations of protector and protected, was not without weight with him. He made up his mind to seek out some tranquil and happy household, some perfect woman nobly planned, in whose fostering care Stella might develop into enlightened and graceful womanhood. And then—and then—in the days to come she might still be his companion and friend, again live under his roof and brighten his days, the first to bid him good-morning, the last to say good-night. She would marry, perhaps; yes, that would be best for both of them. She might anchor herself in marriage to some mild young cleric, who could be Lashmar's chaplain; so that husband and wife might live together under his roof. He saw himself in that far future smiling upon Stella's children, finding a new star in some baby girl who would sit at his feet and listen to him in wide-eyed wonder, just as Stella had done. Surely his

age would not be loveless or lonely; this waif snatched out of the fire would be to him a well-spring of love.

His life had not been all brightness since Stella had dwelt within his walls. Those sensitive nerves of his—sensitive to cold, to heat, to fatigue to pleasure even—had been racked many and many a day. The old agony of pain, the old weariness of prostration had been his again and again; but in every new interval of suffering he had found a growing sweetness in Stella's sympathy. The child had a sense of pity and love far beyond her years, a power to comprehend suffering rarely found even in a woman. She would sit by her benefactor's couch for hours—silent, watchful. She knew every expression of the sufferer's tortured brow, and could mark those intervals of respite in which he liked to talk, and in which it was good for him to have his thoughts diverted into new channels. Her little feet moved lightly over the carpet, her little hands were as gentle as rose leaves falling upon grass. Before she was eight years old she acquired a deftness which made her ministrations pleasanter than those of the most experienced woman-servant in the castle. She could pour out a dose of medicine, or mix a tumbler of lemonade with unerring precision. She was Lashmar's chief nurse in all his illnesses, which, being for the most part of a nervous character, involved no degrading office for nurse or attendant. Gabriel Verner was Stella's subordinate in the sick room, and was quite as gentle as a woman.

Lord Lashmar generally breakfasted in his study when her ladyship was away, and at such periods Verner and Stella always breakfasted with him. The breakfast hour was nine, and Lashmar

often spent an hour in the garden before breakfast, sometimes alone, but more often with Stella for his companion.

She was with him this morning, proud in the repetition of her first Greek verb. She had been learning Latin for more than a year, and could recite bits of the Bucolics with perfect intonation and precision, but Greek had been begun within the last few weeks, and Stella was intensely interested in the beginning of a language which she had been taught to consider the grandest tongue that the peoples of this earth had ever spoken. Had not Homer recited his wondrous tale of Troy in those sonorous syllables? Stella knew the story of Troy as well as other children know the story of Red Riding-Hood.

Stella repeated her verb in its innumerable tenses with very few mistakes, and won a kindly word of approval from Lashmar.

'Most little girls at your age would be learning French instead of Greek,' he said; 'but, as there is nothing in the French language equal to Homer or Plato, I would rather you should learn Greek first and French afterwards.'

They went into breakfast together. Mr. Verner was in the study waiting for them, with his note-book and pencil in his hand, going over a passage in his book. He wrote his manuscript in small scraps, which he revised and re-wrote again and again, carrying the little book about with him wherever he went, poring and pondering over every paragraph, every phrase; and by this laborious method he had contrived to attain an English style which read like a literal translation from Hegel or Schopenhauer.

The table was bright with flowers, old English

silver, and old English china. A large dish of strawberries showed crimson against a background of tea-roses in a great Japanese bowl. The substantials were all upon a side-table. Lashmar was wont to breakfast lightly, on new said eggs and strawberries and cream, in this summer weather, and Stella cared only for crisp, light rolls and fruit and cream. It was Mr. Verner whose fine appetite did justice to the good things on the side-table.

Stella gave a cry of surprise and rapture as she took her seat. Upon her folded napkin lay a glittering golden watch, with a slender chain coiled round it like a serpent. The back of the watch was enamelled, and on the enamel appeared the initial S., surmounted by a star in tiny brilliants.

'Oh, what a beautiful watch!' she cried; 'whose is it?'

'Yours, Stella. You are so precise in giving me my medicine when I am ill that I am sure you know the value of time; so I thought you would like to have a time-keeper of your own.'

Stella ran to him, and threw her arms round his neck and kissed him.

'How good you are to me! you are always giving me pretty things. But a watch! I never thought I should have a watch, like a grown-up person!'

'You are more thoughtful and more exact than many grown-up persons, Stella. You deserve to own a watch.'

'I will be very, very careful of it,' said the child earnestly.

She had often handled Lashmar's watch: had worn it for a week at a time when he was ill, so she was not afraid to open this one. She

read the inscription inside: 'To Stella, from her adopted father, Lashmar, Midsummer Day, 1872.

'That is the best of all,' she said; 'I shall always love the watch for my adopted father's sake.'

They were to start upon an excursion soon after breakfast—an excursion planned in honour of the day. Fifteen miles from Lashmar Castle there were the remains of a mediæval abbey—extensive ruins, in a very fine state of preservation, and situated in a beautiful country. Langdale Abbey was one of the places that everybody went to see, and it afforded an admirable excuse for a picnic. Lashmar knew every stone among the ruins, every wild flower and lichen that grew in the interstices of the stones and clothed the old walls with beauty. But he was never weary of Langdale Abbey, and he told himself that there could be no pleasanter way of spending the day than in a drive to Langdale.

He had lately bought a pair of horses, of which he was particularly proud, fine up-standing bays, an exact match in colour, size, form, action and pace—a pair of horses which would have attracted every eye in Hyde Park, but which were hardly noticed in the neighbourhood of Lashmar Castle where it was an understood thing that Lord Lashmar always drove the finest cattle. He was so rich and had so few ways of spending his money that it seemed only right he should pay high prices for his horses.

He was an admirable whip, firm, temperate, with light hands and an unerring eye. He loved horses, and horses loved him. These bays were fine, honest animals, and reported to be as quiet as sheep. Lord Lashmar had driven them three or four times, and had found them irre-

proachable. He would never have risked Stella's safety by placing her behind dangerous animals, nor would he have imperilled the gray hairs of his faithful old tutor.

The picnic baskets were packed into the phaeton in the stable yard, and at eleven o'clock the carriage came round to the porch.

Stella was ready in the hall, beaming with happiness, the great dark eyes shining out of the shadow made by her broad-brimmed hat. Her short-waisted white frock, broad blue sash, and long wash-leather gloves made her look like one of Reynolds's children. Indeed, with her dark eyes and thick hair, cut straight across her brow, she had always a look of Reynolds's portraits. The aristocratic old Rector of Lashmar used to pat her on the head condescendingly, and call her 'My Reynolds girl.' He was a good man, after his fashion, which was narrow. He could not see any merit in bringing up one orphan in the lap of luxury. He would have had the cost of Stella's maintenance given to some orphanage where it might have been distributed in the shape of thick bread-and-butter and hob-nailed boots, among many children. Lashmar's benevolence seemed to him as the costly box of ointment seemed to Judas—a lavish, unreasoning expenditure. He was always ready to echo Lady Lashmar's reprobation of her stepson's folly. Yes, no doubt he was preparing trouble for himself in the future. The girl must eventually become an incubus.

Stella took her seat beside Lord Lashmar in the phaeton, Gabriel Verner mounted behind, and the groom leapt lightly into his place when the horses were in full motion, deeming that his dignity would have been compromised by mounting

a moment sooner. The bays went with a certain springiness, which told Lashmar they were very fresh.

'Were these horses exercised yesterday?' he asked of the groom.

'No, my Lord, not yesterday. Smiles knew your lordship wanted them for a journey.'

'Were they out the day before?'

'No, my Lord. Smiles thought the weather was too bad.'

The bays were going splendidly, with no hint of running away; but they were very eager, and wanted to go at the top of their pace. Lashmar kept them well in hand, and they bowled merrily along the high road outside the castle. They had fifteen miles before them.

'What nice horses,' said Stella, enjoying the pace.

'Do you like them better than Pyramus and Thisbe?'

'Pyramus and Thisbe are darlings, but these go faster, don't they?'

'Yes, they are going faster to-day.'

They had driven three or four miles in the morning sunshine, between hedge-rows full of eglantine and honeysuckle, past a picturesque Middleshire village, with its tumble-down, half-timbered cottages in black and white, its untidy straw-yards and mouldering barns. The horses were well in hand as Lashmar drove past the little cluster of humble dwellings, and the inn, with its blurred old sign and dripping horse-trough. The village seemed for the most part the abode of sleep or death; for all the men were in the fields, and all the children were at school. But here and there a woman looked out at her door, and admired Lord Lashmar's horses, the light phaeton, the groom's smart livery, and the pretty child in her white frock and straw hat.

About a hundred yards from the village the road made a sharp curve, and Lord Lashmar saw himself face to face with that which might mean danger.

A traction engine in full cry, snorting, panting, groaning—a traction engine serving as a tug for a huge waggon of hay, which loomed large above it, a waggon which should have been drawn by sleek and placid cart-horses, with plaited manes and decorative net-work flapping over their honest foreheads.

The groom stood up and uttered one of those inarticulate cries which are as a common language of the stable. The men in charge of the engine tried to abate the fury of their monster.

Too late! The horses were in that condition of freshness which would have made them bolt at a feather—they *were off* in an instant—all their reserve force in full action.

'Sit firmly, for God's sake, Stella;' said Lashmar, and then to those behind, 'Verner, keep your seat whatever happens; John, try to hold Miss Stella.'

The groom wound his arm round the child's waist. She was looking at Lashmar's face, silent, awe-stricken. How pale he was, and how tightly his lips were set! Yet he did not look frightened, only grave, intent, anxious.

'Are we all going to be killed?' she asked tremulously.

'We are in God's hands, my darling,' he answered.

There was no time for more. The danger was close upon them. Had there been a clear road the bolting of the horses would have been as nothing with such a whip as Lashmar.

But the road was narrow, and they had to pass that huge bulk of the hay-waggon and the engine.

The drivers were dragging their load as far as they could towards the hedge, but there was little time for this, with those frightened horses tearing along at a mad gallop. Lashmar was holding them firmly, keeping them fairly straight; but, just as they neared the engine, it gave one final snort; the off-horse swerved, the pole snapped, and both horses fell in a heap, dragging the phaeton over in their fall.

Black night closed over Stella's dreams, ending this birthday of hers in deepest darkness before it was noon.

* * * * *

After that sudden extinguishment of the actual world, there came one long dream of horror. One long dream—a dream without awakening, yet a vision so entangled that it was, as it were, many dreams within one dream. Not once in that long labyrinth of unreality did the child recognise the realities around her; not once did her senses emerge from that world of phantoms, and the burden of shadows that thronged about her bed—terrible shadows some of them, haunting shapes from the realm of legend and poetry—Agamemnon in his bloody bath, Achilles with the corpse of Hector tied to his chariot. There was one dream in which she was Hector, dead and bleeding, dragged to the Grecian ships—the grit and dust were in her throat and choked her, the thundering hoofs of those fiery horses deafened her, she was dead yet sentient. All her studies, and stories, and happy fancies of the past, personified themselves in those everlasting hours of delirium—a period in which hours were exaggerated into ages, and a day seemed an eternity. Her first Greek verb, her lessons from Virgil, her scraps of science, her childish knowledge of the heavens—all the things she had learned became a torture to her.

She was a star in the constellation of Cassiopeia's Chair, shining with her sister-stars in the cold November sky. Oh! how remote, and how cold it was in that far world of night and darkness! how dreadful to be parted for ever from her friend and father! She could see the world she had left, a little spot in the immensity of the universe below her—one little spot, faintly luminous, like a glowworm in a hedge; and there was one speck of brighter light in that dim world, an electric spark, no bigger than a pin's point, which she knew was Lashmar's soul. It shone like a star in that distant earth, brighter than all the other souls of humanity, because he was the kindest and noblest man upon the earth. "Like Christ," she said to herself. She had often told herself in her childish simplicity, unconsciously irreverent, that he was like Christ. And now her agony was the thought of an impassable gulf between her benefactor and herself. She strained, she struggled to pass that black abyss; she stretched out her arms as if they were wings. Sometimes they seemed to her as wings, and carried her for a long way, whirling onward in darkness: but that glowworm spot in the far distance came no nearer to her straining eyes—that gulf was infinite and impassable!

'Never to see him again,' she moaned; 'never to see him again. Too far—too far!'

And honest Betsy, who sat beside her bed sewing, wondered that the child, who had never recovered her senses since the accident, should have this instinctive consciousness of an irreparable loss.

At last there came an interval in that agony of delirium. The throng of spectres was clouded over by a gracious darkness. The weary arms ceased to strain towards that unattainable point,

The burning lids fell over the aching eyeballs. A deep and healing sleep followed that feverish unrest; and the patient woke to know the kindly face of her nurse for the first time in ten long days and nights of fever.

She saw the sunshine of a summer afternoon streaming in at her window.

'Is it my birthday?' she asked, simply. 'Why didn't we go to Langdale Abbey?'

And then, sitting up in her bed, very weak and white, and wan, she stretched out her tremulous hands, and asked—

'Where is my watch?'

'Here, darling,' answered Betsy, taking the watch out of a morocco case on the dressing-table, delighted to gratify her patient. 'There's your pretty watch. Oh, my, isn't it a pretty one! And ain't you lucky to have a watch, just like a grown-up young lady!'

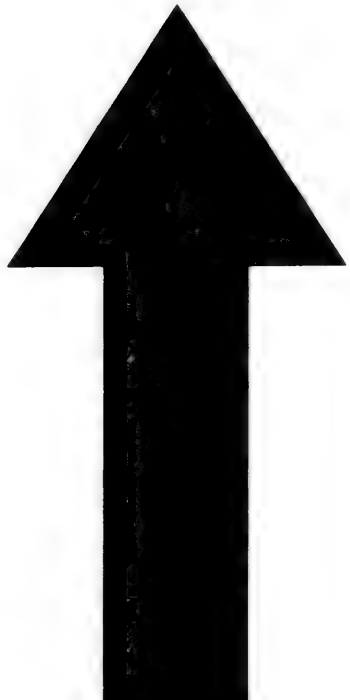
The weak little hands wavered as they took the watch, the exhausted frame sank helpless on the bed, but the child held the watch before her eyes all the time, and the tremulous fingers contrived to open the case.

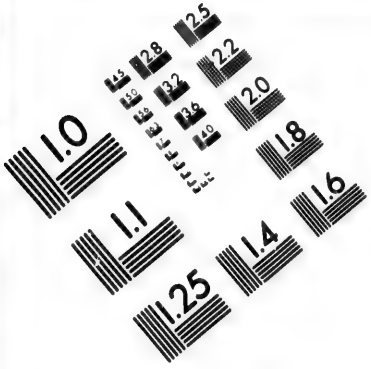
'Read it,' she said faintly; and Betsy spelled out the inscription, 'To Stella, from her adopted father, Lashmar.' 'Oh, isn't it beautiful!' exclaimed Betsy, and then she began to cry, and cried a deluge, as young women of her class usually can, seeming to have a better supplied reservoir of tears than the highly cultured.

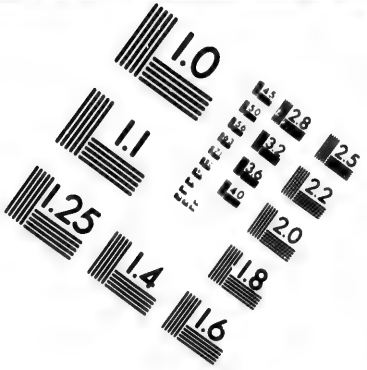
'Don't cry,' said Stella; 'there's nothing to cry for.'

She had forgotten the dream of the star, the pitiless abyss between her and Lashmar, the sense of everlasting severance.

She lay for some minutes looking at her watch holding it in both hands, as if it were too heavy







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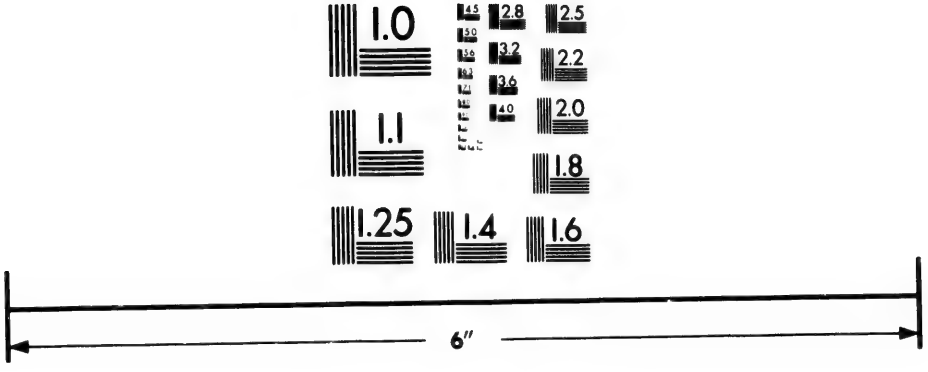

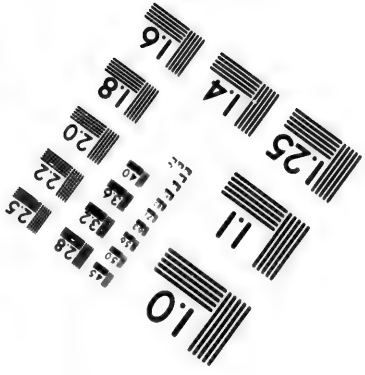

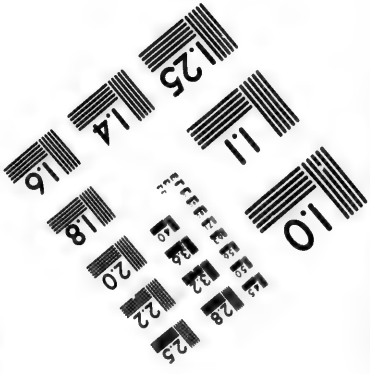

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for one. Then she put it to her ear, and found that it was mute.

'A quarter to twelve,' she said, 'why did it stop at a quarter to twelve?'

Again Betsy dissolved into tears.

'Shoosh, dear,' she murmured, patting Stella's shoulder, 'go to sleep, my pet, till the doctor comes to see you. Let Betsy put the pretty watch under your pillow.'

'I don't want to sleep any more; I want to get up and be dressed; you know it's my birthday, and I am to be all day with Lord Lashmar. How late the sunshine looks—like afternoon. Have I overslept myself?'

'You have been very, very ill, dear,' answered Betsy, in a soothing, preachy-preachy tone, which is peculiarly exasperating to an intellectual child, 'you are much too weak to get up. You shall have your Brand's essence presently and a nice little bit of toast.'

'But it's my birthday,' urged Stella, 'and I am to dine with his lordship.'

'My poor pet, your birthday was ten days ago, a week before the funeral,' answered Betsy.

The word was spoken unawares. That awe-inspiring, much-discussed event of the funeral—a stately and imposing ceremonial, including all the dismal grandeur of the old school and all the floral decorations of the new—had been in everybody's mouth at Lashmar Castle for the last six days. It was the standard by which time was reckoned.

'What funeral?' cried Stella, starting up in her bed with a scared look.

She was so weak that cold drops broke out upon her brow in the agitation of this question. Poor Betsy was at her wits' end.

'Go to sleep, pet,' she pleaded; 'the doctor

wouldn't like you to talk so much. Lie down and go to sleep, lovey.'

But even these endearments failed to soothe the perturbed spirit.

'What funeral?' repeated Stella; 'is anybody dead?'

Betsy only patted her shoulder dumbly, with streaming eyes.

'Who is dead? Not Mr. Verner? Oh! he was so good to me. He is not dead, is he?'

'No, dear, no; Mr. Verner is quite well. He wasn't hurt at all, poor dear gentleman,' answered Betsy.

'He wasn't hurt! Who was hurt, then? Was anybody hurt?' cried Stella, her eyes assuming the wild look they had had in delirium.

'You were hurt, my poor precious. You fell on your dear little head.'

Stella gave a scream, and flung her arms round Betsy's neck. Memory returned in a flash.

'The horses!' she cried; 'yes, I remember. Oh! those dreadful horses. Lord Lashmar drove so well; but I thought we were going to be killed. *He* was not hurt, was he? Ask him to come to me; I want to see Lord Lashmar; directly, directly.'

Those large dark eyes of hers were growing wilder and wilder. They looked unnaturally large in the small, pale face, sorely shrunken from its childish plumpness during the wasting agony of that ten days' fever. She tried to get out of bed, pushing aside Betsy's restraining arms.

'Ask Lord Lashmar to come to me. Let me go to Lord Lashmar.'

'Lord Lashmar is out, love,' said the frightened Betsy; 'Lord Lashmar has gone to Brumm for the day, on particular business.'

It was true. Betsy felt she had satisfied her

charge and saved her soul from the burden of a lie. It was literal truth which she had spoken, and yet for Stella it was not the truth: for Stella it was a miserable, mocking lie.

She was not satisfied, but lay back upon her pillows too exhausted to struggle. She lay moaning. 'I want to see Lord Lashmar. When will he be back? Oh! when, when, when?'

She sobbed herself into a feverish, restless slumber; and she was delirious again that night.

The doctor was much concerned when he came to see her in the evening, and was told how she had recovered her senses for a little while, only to lose them again.

'Did you tell her anything?' he asked.

'Not a word,' answered Betsy. 'She wanted to see Lord Lashmar dreadfully, but I told her he was out for the day, and she seemed to believe me; but she made herself very unhappy about him. She was so fond of him, poor dear, and well she might be.'

'Ah, well indeed!' said the doctor, shaking his head. 'I'm afraid she has seen the best days of her life, poor little thing.'

Mr. Stokes was a kind, simple soul, who had lived all his life in the village of Avondale, just a mile from the much smaller village of Lashmar, a pretty little cluster of houses on the bank of the river, nestling round an old Saxon church that seemed much too large for its surroundings. Mr. Stokes knew everybody in the neighbourhood, and had known the younger generation from their cradles. He was a skilful surgeon, and was tolerably shrewd in his diagnosis, though he seldom went farther afield than Brumm, and had not seen much of the great city since he was a student

at Bartlemy's. He knew all about Stella, and Lady Lashmar's feelings with regard to her.

'I am afraid she is in for a relapse,' he said after he had taken her temperature. 'A hundred and five three-fourths. That looks bad. You must do all you can to keep her quiet. Give her Brand's essence and a teaspoonful of brandy with a little yoke of egg alternate half-hours. You'll have to sit up with her again to-night.'

'I don't mind *that*,' said Betsy. 'I don't mind anything except hearing her ask for Lord Lashmar.'

The doctor was right. Stella re-entered the land of phantoms. This time her worst dream was of a vast and sunless swamp—such a swamp as that she had read about, far across the Atlantic—the Great Dismal Swamp, where never tree or flower flourished; a place of desolation; impassable, exhaling poisonous odours, brooded over by dark clouds, a semi-darkness worse than night.

And she was wading in that swamp for ever and for ever, weary to agony—the dull agony of aching bones and burdened brain. Far, far away a vanishing point in remotest distance, there was a speck of light—the same speck she had seen on the far earth when she was a star—and that light was Lashmar. She was perpetually trying to reach that distant point, weighed down for ever by the sense of utter impossibility, yet obliged to try. The agonising dream seemed to endure for ages; long nights of repetition, in which Betsy hovered over her charge with cup or teaspoon, forcing her doses of nourishment between the parched hot lips, with a persistence that seemed sheer brutality; but that very tangible presence of the buxom Betsy had no effect upon the visionary world in which Stella dwelt. The dim and distant light was

always there, glimmering faintly across the wide, gray waste, in the perpetual twilight.

Perhaps it was the faint gleam of the night-light in the remotest corner of the room, which suggested that distant ray shining across the dull gray level of dreamland.

It was in the night that the goblin crew rode rampant over that distracted brain. The days passed for the most part in a kind of stupor: the patient lying helpless, apathetic, recognising no one, caring for nothing, in a state of semi-consciousness which was neither sleeping nor waking.

From such a condition as this she was aroused by the howling of a summer storm in the great oaks, and the sharp rattle of the rain against the casement. The sky was cold and gray. Stella knew not if it were morning or afternoon. Memory was a blank again. She had forgotten all that had happened since her birthday, had forgotten the accident which had made that day fatal.

This time Betsy was not at hand to be questioned. It was between four and five o'clock, and Betsy had gone down to tea, had gone to expatiate upon the storm to her fellow-servants, who were all wont at such times to wish that they lived in London, where thunder and lightning would seem comparatively harmless amidst the cheerfulness and sense of protection afforded by crowded streets and policemen. The thunder and lightning were over, or Betsy would not have left her charge.

Stella looked about the room wonderingly, slowly coming back from dreamland, slowly realising the facts of the external world. Yes, it was her own room; there were all those ornaments and knick-knacks which children speak of comprehensively as 'pretty things.' The silver casket on her dressing-table, the scent bottles, the china monsters,

the bright coloured pilgrim bottles from that legendary Eastern world, of which she had heard and learnt so much—the cradle of mankind—the well-filled book-shelves, the dolls and doll's-house. But these last had been degraded from their high estate to an obscure corner, things to be ashamed of, that one could ever have been so babyish as to care much about them.

Yes, it was her own room, that lightsome, airy chamber, high up among the tree-tops and the swallows. It was her nest, in which she had been as free and happy as the birds of the air, more tenderly cherished than ever nestling by parent bird.

The door leading into the sitting-room was half open, and there were people talking, she had heard their voices amidst the rattle of the rain and the bluster of the storm.

'Shall you send her away?' asked a manly voice, rich and full, a voice that was not altogether unfamiliar. It was like her benefactor's, but stronger, fuller.

'No, I shall keep her here. I consider that a sacred duty, for poor Hubert's sake. But I shall try to repair his sad mistake in the manner of rearing her. I shall bring her up as a child of the lower classes ought to be brought up. I shall train her to be useful, a bread-winner among a class of bread-winners.'

Too well did Stella know this second voice. These were the sonorous tones of that terrible personage whom she had met from time to time in the corridors or in the gardens, and who had always scowled at her, and passed her by in haughty silence. She knew the face and figure to which the voice belonged, the tall and stately form, the strongly marked brows and aquiline nose.

'Rather rough upon her, poor little wretch, after having been so pampered.'

'That is poor Hubert's fault, not mine,' replied her ladyship coldly.

'Well, it was one of those silly things which your very clever men are apt to do,' said the other voice. 'I took an intense dislike to the brat from the hour poor Lash brought her home, like some strayed mongrel, and not half so interesting. If I were you I should clear her out of the castle as soon as she is well enough to budge; pack her off to one of those innumerable institutions for rearing up beggar brats in the fear of their spiritual pastors and masters upon sound Conservative principles. You'll get rid of a nuisance; and there'll be a better chance of her making a good housemaid than if she is allowed to stay here where she'll always remember Lashmar's idiotic indulgence.'

'I have told you that I mean to bring her up under my own eye,' replied her ladyship, in a terrible voice.

She was a woman who could not brook contradiction, would not endure to have her will gainsaid or her wisdom questioned; least of all could she endure such questioning from her own son. She was a woman who loved to govern, and to whom the idea of domineering even over such a helpless waif as Boldwood's daughter was very pleasant.

'I shall bring her up under my own eye,' she repeated; 'I shall see that she is taught properly, and that above all she learns to forget her foolish childhood, and to understand her position as a friendless orphan, who must learn to earn her daily bread.'

'A friendless orphan!' repeated Stella, in a faint whisper. Of whom were they talking? she asked herself. Could it be of her? She remembered how once when old Mr. Verner was

expatiating upon Lashmar's goodness he had told her that were it not for that generous benefactor she would have been a friendless orphan.

And now her ladyship was talking about a friendless orphan who had been brought up foolishly.

'She will have to begin a new life as soon as she gets well.'

'As soon as she gets well,' repeated Stella. Yes, it was of her they were talking. They had got her into their power somehow, those two enemies. They were going to alter her happy life. They would take away her Greek grammar perhaps, stop the new study of which she was so proud, and which had seemed to bring her nearer to Lashmar. He had talked to her of the time when they would be able to read Homer together.

Oh! where was Lashmar? Why did he not come and stop their cruel talking? She clasped her hands in an agony of despair. She called out in a faint scream, too weak to cry aloud, as it were struggling in a nightmare dream—

'Lord Lashmar, Lord Lashmar!'

A face—a bright young face, handsome as Apollo's—looked in at the door, only for a flash. It gave way in the next instant to the stern countenance of the dowager.

'Are you awake, child?' she asked.

'Please ask Lord Lashmar to come to me,' cried the girl piteously.

'What do you want with Lord Lashmar? Lie down, child; you are too weak to sit up yet awhile. I'll send Betsy to you.'

'No, no, I don't want her. I want Lord Lashmar. I shall go mad if I don't see him!'

The dowager seated herself in Betsy's vacant

chair by the bed, an awful figure, stern and terrible as Fate itself.

She was clad from top to toe in black, densest black, not that rich and glittering raiment in which Stella had often seen her of old—a costly combination of satin and brocade sparkling and flashing with tremulous fringes of jet. This was a gown of some dull fabric which reflected not a ray of light. To her very chin Lady Lashmar was swathed in black crape, and black crape is to a child's eye of all fabrics the most hideous.

'You cannot see your benefactor, Lord Lashmar,' said the stern voice. 'You will never see him again. Cannot you understand what this black gown of mine means?'

'He is dead!' shrieked the child, and then remembering that ominous word dropped unawares by Betsy, 'It was *his* funeral.'

'Yes, my unhappy child, your benefactor was killed in the accident from which you narrowly escaped with your life. The loss for you is a bitter one in the present, although it may be a blessing to you in the future. My stepson's foolish indulgence might have been your ruin, here and hereafter.'

Stella heard not a word of this little sermon. She had cast herself on her pillow, and was sobbing out her heart in the passionate, hopeless grief of childhood.

Dead! She had never thought that he could die. Dead! How often he had talked to her of what would happen when he was an old man; how she was to be the companion of his declining years, the compensation for all his losses.

Dead! Never more to look upon her with those thoughtful eyes; never more to speak to her in that low, tender voice; never more to touch

her with that hand whose gentle touch upon her head had always seemed a benediction.

'My angel, my friend, my father!' she cried. 'Oh, God! be good to me, and let me die too.'

That was her prayer at morning and nightfall, for many a day to come.

CHAPTER VII

THE NEW CINDERELLA

JULY, with its roses and lilies, blossoming limes, and long sultry days, and lingering sunsets late into the dewy night, was over. It was August, and though summer was still lovely in the land, the summer evenings were shortening, the roses were waning a little, as to the limitless profusion of bloom; while here and there those flowers which are the harbingers of autumn began to show in the castle gardens: gaudy dahlias, old-world hollyhocks, flaming sunflowers, staring at the blue sky with their great round brown faces in ragged yellow nightcaps, against a background of gray stone wall.

Stella's new life had begun. It was verily a new life; so entirely different from the old one that it seemed to the child as if she had died and been born again, in the same place, but with another personality.

And yet though she still had her abode in Lashmar Castle it could hardly be said that it was the same place as that which had been her

home in the lifetime of Hubert, Lord Lashmar. She lived in other rooms; she looked out of other windows, at an utterly dissimilar prospect. She had not entered the library, or those adjoining rooms in which she had once been so happy since her benefactor's death. The gardens about which she had once roamed as freely as the butterflies were now a closed world for her. She had no more right to be there than the coachman's children, or the housekeeper's little niece: and not one of those well-behaved little persons would have presumed to enter her ladyship's garden.

Stella lived in the servants' quarters now, and looked out of windows which all opened upon the stable-yard, a great stony desert, whose only picturesque feature was the pump, with its stone basin, round which a coachman, with the love of the beautiful, had planted some nasturtiums. Those nasturtiums were almost the only flowers that Stella saw in that month of August. She was learning to know her place—her place as allotted and appointed by Lady Lashmar, and that place was the place of an under-housemaid.

There were eleven housemaids at Lashmar Castle. That had been the orthodox number as long as the oldest inhabitant of Lashmar village could remember. It was supposed that by no less a staff could the castle be scrubbed and swept and dusted as it should be. There were three upper-housemaids, each of whom had supreme command upon her particular floor. She was, as it were, captain of that deck. Then came the five second housemaids; two for the ground-floor, with its spacious state apartments and numerous sitting-rooms; two for the first floor, and which included her ladyship's suite and

the new lord's suite, and all the important visitors' rooms; and one for the upper story, which was given over to rarely used bachelors' rooms and rat-warrens. Lastly, there were three drudges who fetched and carried water and coals, made the fires and cleaned the grates, slaves who were treated as the Israelites in Egypt before the advent of Moses.

Betsy had been reduced to the ranks of the eleven. She was one of the second housemaids, and her province was the first floor, where she was under the special supervision of her aunt Barker, who had a room of her own in an obscure corner behind her ladyship's suite, one of those curious little rooms such as in Hampton Court Palace are described as the King's Closet, or the Queen's Oratory. Under Betsy's eye Stella was to be trained to all the duties of an upper-housemaid. She was not to go through the baser drudgeries, the water-drawing and coal-carrying, the black-lead brush and scouring paper. She was to be spared that rude apprenticeship, out of deference to the dead lord's fancy. Nay, should she prove especially teachable, and handy with her needle, she might eventually escape housework altogether and be admitted to the holy of holies, personal attendance upon her ladyship.

'You are getting short of breath and unwieldy, Barker,' said Lady Lashmar; 'by the time that child is seventeen or eighteen I shall want somebody to run about for me.' Barker shook her head, and pursed up her lips.

'I don't think Miss Stella will ever suit you in that way, my lady,' she began.

'How often have I told you that she is not to be called Miss Stella?'

'I don't think Stella will ever do for a servant,

my lady. His poor lordship spoilt her too much. She knows such a lot, and she frets day and night about her Greek and Latin, over history and geography, and poetry, and such like. She starts up in the middle of the night sometimes sobbing as if her heart would break, and saying that she is forgetting everything his lordship taught her. And then she'll go over a lot of gibberish which she says is Greek or Latin, though I'm sure it don't sound like anything half so sensible. I don't believe she'll ever make a good servant, my lady; her life has been begun the wrong way.'

'She is young enough to begin life again,' replied her ladyship sternly. 'The greatest blunder of the present day is the over-education of the masses: a blunder which is producing a race of young women who all want to be doctors and lawyers instead of wives and mothers; and a race of young men who would sooner starve in a paradise of pen and ink than be prosperous butchers and bakers. I look to you, Barker, to get all foolish nonsense out of that girl's head. If I hear any more of her fretting I shall send her to the workhouse.'

After this Barker could say no more. She knew the iron temper of that mistress whom she had served in all faithfulness and submission for the last fifteen years.

Stella suffered her new life meekly enough, but almost every hour of it was suffering. Reared as she had been, amongst delicatest, most gracious surroundings, by a man whose original refinement had been spiritualised by illness and seclusion, every detail of this outer world of the servants' hall and still-room jarred upon her sensitive nerves. The loud voices, the everlasting clatter, the quarrelling and jeering—jeering which was meant for wit—all these revolted the keen young spirit. Had she been a

woman she might have put on the armour of philosophy. She might have retired within herself, lived her own life of quietness and contemplation amidst the bluster of these vulgar lives; but she was a child, and had not learned stoicism; she was a child, and dependent upon externals for her joy or sorrow, and all things in her external life had been made bitterness to her, at that time when her heart wounds were still fresh. Under the happiest circumstances she would have been broken-hearted by the loss of her friend and father; but as it was, all the conditions of her life intensified her sense of loss.

She had been banished from those pretty rooms in which she had lived for five joyous years. All her cherished treasures, her benefactor's gifts of toys and trinkets and ornaments had been taken away from her; and, worst loss of all, her books had been taken also. Those books which had been as gates opening into other worlds, the books which Lashmar had taught her to love and to understand.

The banishment from that Eden of her childhood had been effected by the dowager in the briefest, most off-hand manner. So soon as Stella was well enough to leave her room, Lady Lashmar sent her to the still-room. She was to live there with the upper-housemaids, and she was to sleep in the second housemaids' dormitory. Having pronounced this sentence, her ladyship locked the outer door and put the key of the tower rooms into her pocket.

'I shall arrange by-and-by what use we can make of those two rooms,' she said; 'no doubt they will be wanted when his lordship fills the house for the shooting.'

Hubert Lashmar had been no sportsman: and there had not been a battue in the Lashmar preserves

since his father's time. Victorian had gone out with a couple of spaniels and a keeper when he happened to be at home in October: but for the most part the pheasants had had no enemies except the poachers. The servants were beginning to perk themselves already at the idea of big shooting parties and liberal vails.

So Stella was banished from her tower among the tree-tops, her casements overlooking dale and river, wood and hill-side. She was much too unhappy to think about her possessions, her 'pretty things' as she had called them, so she made no moan at this off-hand confiscation of her property. It was afterwards, when she found herself sitting in a corner of the still-room, leaning her head against the wall, hearing the chatter of the maids as it were afar off, it was then that she thought of her books, and asked Betsy to fetch them for her.

Good-natured Betsy was almost as down-hearted as her charge at the sad change that had come over both their lives; for Betsy, as Miss Stella's personal attendant, had been somebody in the household, and had done very much as she liked. As a second housemaid she was nobody, and subject to be ordered about by her superior officer. She ran off to the tower, found it locked, and then went to her aunt Barker, as the only safe means of communication with her ladyship.

'Might Miss Stella have her books out of the tower room?' asked Barker an hour later, when she was taking out her ladyship's dinner gown, while Celestine dressed her ladyship's hair.

'Certainly not,' replied the dowager decisively. 'Reading for a young person in her position is only another name for idleness. If she read her Bible and her hymn book that will be quite as much reading as she will have leisure for. Middleham

tells me that she has hardly an idea of plain needlework.'

Middleham was the chief of the housemaids, the oldest servant at Lashmar, older even in service than the housekeeper or the *chef*, both of whom had grown old-fashioned in the same employment. Middleham was seven-and-forty, and had lived at the castle since she was twelve. She was an awful personage, with a bony figure and gray hair. She could read a little, by spelling out the difficult words; but she had forgotten how to write, and she was proud of it. 'I left school when I was ten,' she said, 'nowadays the girls go to school up to fourteen, and come away stuck-up minxes that look down upon their parents, and are no more use in their homes than fine ladies. First Standard indeed! The only standard in *my* day was a broom and a scrubbing-brush. When a girl had learnt to be handy with those she was a help to her parents.'

Middleham was a superior needle-woman. Those great bony hands of hers could do fine stitching that looked as if done by fairy fingers. She had sole charge of the rich stores of house linen, finest that the looms of Belfast could produce; table linen into every piece of which the armorial bearings of the Lashmars were woven. Under the cold gray eye of Middleham, Stella made her first essays in plain needlework.

'I declare the child hardly knows how to hold her needle,' said the head housemaid.

'Lord Lashmar did not like to see me work,' faltered Stella tearfully.

Middleham groaned aloud.

'You'll have to work now, and if you don't learn to work well, you'll have to be sent to the workhouse,' said Middleham, and then looked round

triumphantly as one who had made a pun. The other housemaids all laughed dutifully. They feared and hated Middleham, who was a fierce foe to followers, and all 'walking out.' It was popularly supposed that she had never walked out with anyone herself, that her innate grimness had kept followers at a distance. That, like Shakespeare's Royal Virgin, she had ever walked in maiden meditation, fancy free: and it may be observed, that at the time that lovely line was penned, good Queen Bess must have been about as grim a personage as Middleham.

Oh, how dull the life was! how dreary and monotonous, despite its clatter! The great dinner in the servants' hall, the steaming joints, the monster pudding, the all-pervading smell of beer; the male underlings all clustered at the end of the table, having their own conversation, and their own whispered jokelets, digging each other in the ribs, exploding, with full mouths, into foolish, spluttering laughter. Then the long afternoon; sitting at work hemming a kitchen cloth, perhaps, by the window that looked into the stony yard, where all the summer air was scented with stables. How the child pictured the park and the river, the loved and lovely river on which she and Lashmar had been wont to spend long summer days, with books and sketching block—dreamy days, idle days, sweet, sweet days! She could see the shining wherry with its luxurious crimson cushions, its sheepskin mat, its boxes and artful contrivances for picnic luncheon or afternoon tea. She wondered whether the new Lord Lashmar was enjoying himself in that boat on this exquisite afternoon. She looked up at the summer sky, the only thing of beauty which she could see from her dungeon, a sky of deepest sapphire, with fleecy cloudlets dancing gaily in the blue.

'I do declare you have not done six stitches in as many minutes,' said Middleham. 'I have been watching you.'

The pale, pinched face reddened, and the needle went a little quicker over the harsh fabric. Middleham resumed her study of a bad place in one of the best table cloths. These two had the spacious still-room all to themselves this afternoon. It was cleaning day on all the floors of the castle, a universal scrubbing and polishing, which kept the ten housemaids at work till tea-time. It was only Middleham who could afford to sit still after having given her orders. She would walk round the ground-floor rooms by-and-by, just before tea, and spy out grains of dust overlooked in obscure corners, or pieces of furniture that had not been properly polished.

At five o'clock a bell sounded, and the first and second housemaids came swarming in to tea. The upper servants had their meals in the housekeeper's room; the drudges, under-housemaids, scullery and kitchen and vegetable maids, herded in a den of their own, a cool, stony room, off one of the kitchens. Barker was free of housekeeper's room and still-room; and she had the extra privilege of having her tea carried up to her own little nest, whenever she was so minded.

How Stella hated that noisy tea-hour, the foolish jokes and laughter, the cruel chaff for which she sometimes afforded the object, the great metal pots which gave the tea a tinny flavour, the mountains of thick bread-and-butter, the fishy smell of periwinkles or shrimps, the litter of cresses and other green-meat, without which tea was unpalatable to the housemaids.

It was the hour at which they all unbent, with elbows on the table, and tea poured into saucers — the hour at which they talked and

laughed the loudest. They had all forgotten their dead lord, and were full of anticipations about the high jinks that would be held at the Castle now Victorian was master.

'I don't suppose there'll be much of a change yet awhile,' said Barker, who happened to be taking her tea in the still-room. 'His lordship is going away in a fortnight. He has been appointed First Secretary of Legation at Ve-enna.'

'You might have told us that before,' retorted Middleham, who was jealous of Barker's superior opportunities.

'I only heard it this morning when I was waiting on her ladyship. His lordship came into her room with an open letter in his hand, and showed it to her. "I must be off in a fortnight," says he. I could see that she was very vexed. "That was all very well when you were a younger son," she says, "but I don't see the necessity for it now." "Do you suppose I want to see the world any the less because I am called Lord Lashmar?" says he. "What a queer old mother you are!"'

'What a queer old mother!' echoed a chorus of housemaids, with Homeric laughter. 'Fancy calling her ladyship a queer old mother. He's a rare one for cheek, is Master Victorian. He's your right sort for a lord; he'll stamp 'em down wherever he goes.'

'"Vienner 'as been the dream of my life," he says, and then goes whistling out of the room, as light-hearted as you like, leaving her ladyship blacker than thunder.'

Stella sat amidst their babble, with no relish for steaming tea in a thick crockery cup, and with a loathing of shrimps and periwinkles. Afternoon tea with Lord Lashmar had been a

poem. The quaint old silver teapot—silver beaten so thin and enriched with such delicate *repoussé* work—the semi-transparent cups, the dainty cream-jug and toy sugar-tongs, the wafer biscuits and bread-and-butter, the cool sweet atmosphere of an exquisitely ordered room—the flowers, the pictures, the books, the all-surrounding beauty: and she had exchanged these things, and the dear love that made them sweetest, for the company of these vulgar women who despised and laughed at her.

Betsy was kind, and the others did not mean to be unkind. They did not beat or pinch or starve her; but they were powerless to comprehend the workings of that young soul. They saw the red swollen eyelids, and called her a cry-baby; they pointed the finger of derision at her because she was unskilled and clumsy in duties that were so easy to them; because she could not hem a duster expeditiously, or polish a mahogany table. And again and again came the reproach against the dead. 'What a pity Lord Lashmar had brought her up to be such a little fool!'

They had not spared her feelings in their talk of the dead lord. They had freely discussed the details of the accident—how his lordship had been thrown head foremost on the hard high-road, and had broken his neck. It was instantaneous death, they said. And how Stella had fallen more luckily upon the grassy border of the road, and had been brought home unconscious with concussion of the brain, and then before she awoke from her stupor, fever had set in—symptomatic fever, the doctor called it—and she had been very bad indeed.

But old Mr. Verner and the groom had escaped easily; the groom with a few bruises and

a good shaking, and Mr. Verner, who fell on the top of him, without a scratch. Stella asked what had become of Mr. Verner, longing for him, as for the only friend left her; but she was told that he had left directly after the funeral, to go home to his own people, as it was supposed. There was not even so much comfort as this left to her.

Night was worst of all. She slept in a little bed in the spacious dormitory given up to the five second housemaids. It was a large, bare room, forming part of a special servants' wing which had been added to the castle fifty years before, and which the builder had made as unbeautiful as in him lay; and builders have large capabilities in that line. It was a long, white-washed room, like the common room of a debtor's prison. The windows looked into a stony well, on the other side of which was the laundry. There was not a tree nor a leaf within sight; even ivy had refused to grow in that vault-like atmosphere. And to keep up the prison-like idea the windows were all guarded with iron bars, lest peradventure the followers of the housemaids should break in and elope with their ladies, like the knights in border ballads.

Stella was sent to bed nightly at eight o'clock, sent to bed in the sweet summer gloaming, while the birds were singing so happily in the woods, and the flowers were only just beginning to close. Middleham was inexorable as to this hour of departure.

'At eight o'clock you go, or I'll know the reason why,' and at eight o'clock Stella crept wearily up the shadowy staircase, and took off her tear-stained black frock, and said her prayers—long, tearful prayers—and laid herself down upon the hard little bed.

Not to sleep. She was too unhappy to sleep easily, and she knew that at half-past ten the five would come, like a band of noisy fiends let loose from Pandemonium, and would talk of their Sunday clothes and their young men, and chaff each other, and perhaps quarrel with each other for a good hour, before slumber fell upon the fold. She would lie with closed eyes, trying not to hear, yet with those delicate ears of hers listening involuntarily. They were good-natured, honest girls for the most part; modest withal, according to their lights; no more frivolous or empty-headed than a band of school-girls in a fashionable seminary; but their talk, with its monotonous repetitions, its silly jokes, was torture to the sensitive child.

The hourly suffering of her days, sleepless nights, and loss of appetite soon had their effects, Stella began to look very ill—worse than she had looked even when she first got up from her bed of fever. Betsy was anxious about her; took her aside and questioned her. Why did she look so miserable?

Stella burst into tears, and unburdened her soul. She was altogether unhappy. She hated the still-room, she hated Middleham; but most of all she hated the room where she slept, and the chatter of the maids.

'I hardly ever sleep,' she added piteously; 'I lie awake all night waiting to see the daylight between the iron bars.'

'That's very bad,' said Betsy, 'we must see what can be done.'

She went off to her aunt, and the two women put their heads together. There was very little use in appealing to her ladyship. Barker knew the state of her feelings towards her stepson's *protégée*.

There was a little room on the floor over the servants' dormitories, a floor in the roof, which was mostly given over to linen closets and box-rooms, a room that had been occupied once by a valet. It was very small, and had a sloping ceiling; but the dormer window commanded a sidelong peep of the park—just about as much as that fine view of the sea put forward by a hardened lodging-house keeper—and Betsy, who knew her charge better than anyone else, fancied that this little room would be as a haven of rest to Stella. James, the footman, who was a handy youth, might put up a shelf or two for her, and by-and-by perhaps Betsy would be able to get a few of those books—lesson books, poetry books, story books—for which the child's sickened heart longed so sorely; the only possible consolation where all human comfort was lost.

There were a neat little iron bedstead and the necessary furniture, all of the plainest, barest, most uninteresting order, as duly made and provided for a subject race; but when Betsy took the child up to the little room under the tiles, and told her that she could have it for her very own, Stella burst into hysterical tears of delight.

'Oh, how good of you!' she cried; 'how sweet of you, Betsy! Somebody loves me still then.'

'Of course I love you, you foolish little thing; whoever said I didn't? only I daren't disobey her ladyship; but some day, perhaps, I shall be able to get hold of a few of those books of yours that you've been fretting about.'

'Will you, dearest Betsy? What, my Latin grammar, and the Greek one too; and my Virgil, and the Greek Fairy Tales, and the Lady of the Lake? That was his last Christmas present—such a lovely book. They are all my very own, Betsy.

He gave them to me. Her ladyship is a thief if she takes them away.'

'No, no, Stella, you must not talk like that. A little adopted thing like you, a poor little waif and stray, can have no real right to anything in a great house like this. Only if poor Lord Lashmar gave them to you it is natural that you should fancy they are your own, and I'll see what I can do,' concluded Betsy vaguely.

She brought Stella half-a-dozen books that night in her apron. The key of the tower rooms had been given up to Middleham, in order that those rooms might be duly swept and dusted; and Betsy had got the key from that austere personage by sheer artifice, and had made her raid upon the books—Virgil, and two grammars, the Greek Fairy Tales, and Chapman's Iliad, and a volume of Wordsworth. The Lady of the Lake was a richly illustrated quarto with splendid binding. Betsy could not venture to remove so handsome and ostensible a book, lest my lady should come on a visit of inspection, and that keen eye of hers should note the disappearance of the volume. The others were all shabby little books which had seen hard usage.

Stella cried over these recovered treasures, in her tiny room with her dormer casement looking towards the tree-tops and the stars. Her mind was refreshed and soothed by the peaceful solitude of her poor little room. Here there was no coarse laughter, there were no cruel taunts. She could hear the owls hooting in the park, the dogs baying in the stable-yard. That was all. She seemed to be far away from everybody; and as she was altogether fearless she loved her solitude.

And now this child of eleven years old set herself with heroic patience to carry on unaided

and alone the education which had been so cruelly interrupted by that stern foe to progress, Death. With her books and pen and ink, and two or three poor little ends of candle garnered for her day by day, by the faithful Betsy, Stella sat late into the night working at Greek and Latin; happy even when her studies were dryest, at the thought that she was carrying on the work her benefactor had begun.

'When I see him in heaven I shall be able to tell him what I have done,' she said to herself.

Her theology was of the simple, confiding kind which has grown old-fashioned even for little children. That fair future world was very real to her ardent fancy. She could picture the woodland walks of a paradise where it was always summer, and where she would meet Hubert Lashmar with a strange light upon his face, like the golden glory round the Infant-Saviour's head in the famous Lashmar Raffaelle—that marvellous picture which she had so often gazed upon by her benefactor's side.

Those nightly studies, the reposeful solitude of her remote little garret had a calming influence upon her spirits. She was less unhappy now in the day-time, having her books to look forward to at night, knowing that she was not lapsing into ignorance, not becoming like those young women with whom she was obliged to live. She had her day-dreams now as she sat in the still-room window, inhaling odours of stables, and hemming an everlasting procession of tea-cloths. She had her dream of the day when she would be grown-up, and well educated, and would be able to write books, like old Gabriel Verner, and when she might earn enough money to have a tiny cottage of her own upon the banks of the Avon, and to have honest Betsy to live with her.

That was her chief day-dream. She had fancies of stories that she might write—stories of beautiful fatal creatures like Helen, or devoted wives like Andromache, or wicked, treacherous women like Clytemnestra. That busy brain of hers had already begun to weave the multi-coloured web of fiction, albeit her pen had not yet essayed to give those dreamings a tangible shape.

Lashmar had told her of an author—a woman—who had reaped thousands and a lasting renown by a simple story of village life, by reason of her power to dive deep down into the mystery of human nature, to fathom the strange depths of the heart of man, just as Homer did in those dim days when poetry began. She, Stella, sighed not for thousands, only for that lowly little cottage by the river, and a garden and summer-house, and plenty of books, and candles to light the long evenings, and kind Betsy for her companion, they two alone together and happy.

Lord Lashmar, the new Lord, Victorian, had left for Vienna without ever having looked on the little serf who had once been his brother's darling. He was very sorry to have lost 'poor dear Lash,' as he called him: but he felt not the slightest interest in Lash's latest fad. Lash had always been full of fads, poor dear boy. Of course, her ladyship would do all that was best and wisest for the child.

'You'll make a sort of semi-genteel waiting-maid of her, I suppose,' he said lightly; 'have her taught to clean your laces and make your caps—whenever the day comes that you take to caps.'

'Perhaps that will not be till I am a grandmother, Victor,' she answered, smiling fondly at her beloved; 'when you have a wife and children I shall feel myself verily a dowager, and then I suppose I must take to caps. By-the-by, dear,

I saw Clarice last week. They have come back to the Hall.'

'Indeed! Puffed up by her new dignity as a presented young person, I suppose,' answered Lashmar.

'No, she was just as sweet as ever, quite simple and childlike. I am told she was one of the prettiest *débutantes* of the year. The newspapers all said as much.'

'The newspapers are always ready to puff a girl whose father counts his fortune by hundreds of thousands,' sneered Lashmar. 'I don't think the Brumm people have quite made up their mind whether Job Danebrook is worth one million or half a dozen; but they are all agreed that his father wheeled a barrow. Now I think both you and I retain an old-fashioned prejudice in favour of good blood.'

'There is some very good blood in Clarice Danebrook's veins, Victor. You forget that her mother was a Montmorency.'

'One thin trickle of blue blood cannot purify the plebeian vat, mother. I know very well what you are hinting at. Clarice is sweet, Clarice is pretty, Clarice has been well brought up, and had a genteel mother. She is, moreover, an only daughter, and will inherit two or three millions. She is one of those exceptionally good matches which you may count upon your fingers. The Lashmars are rich, but they might be richer; would rise to a much higher note in the social scale if they possessed those superfluous millions. Fabulous wealth is the thing people worship nowadays. It is not enough to be rich—a man to be honoured and talked about must be inordinately rich. Yes, I perfectly recognise the truth of all that. But all the same I am not going to be manœuvred into a marriage with

Clarice Danebrook. You can trot her out by-and-by, if you like: and if I fall in love with her I'll ask her to marry me. If I don't I won't, were she worth the wealth of Aladdin.'

'Do you suppose I would ever wish you to marry anyone you could not love?' said his mother, masking her batteries. 'I know you would only choose the best and worthiest. You are too proud to make one of those wretched matches by which some of your order have degraded their rank of late years. I should never fear anything of that kind from you.'

'Well, no, I am not quite an idiot,' answered Lashmar.

'As for Clarice, she is a sweet little thing, and I am really fond of her,' continued her ladyship placidly; 'but I don't think she is quite good enough for you. She has wealth, but she has not rank; and there is, as you say, always that unlucky tradition of the wheelbarrow.'

'Dear old mother, we always think alike,' said Victorian, bending down to kiss the dowager's broad brow.

His eyes sparkled with suppressed laughter. He knew her so well—knew that she had made up her mind that he was to marry Clarice Danebrook and no other, knew that to this end she had made much of the damsel, and been civil to her very commonplace mother, and her sternly plebeian father. For no other than an interested motive would the great Lady Pitland's daughter have cultivated the society of a young person of vulgar lineage; yea, albeit a thin streak of the Montmorency blood had qualified the coarseness of the Danebrooks.

Victorian laughed at his mother's manœuvres, laughed most of all at the idea that she should think herself able to throw dust in his eyes; and he held

himself in reserve for the future. He meant to do just what he liked with his life. He would have held himself free to marry a beggar-maid, like King Cophetua, had he so pleased. But he was not at all the kind of young man to feel drawn towards beggar-maids. He was worldly to the core, had been brought up to consider everything from the worldling's standpoint. He meant, when his time should come, to marry well, brilliantly if possible, to make such a match as should double his present importance in the world. No, he did not think that Clarice was good enough. Mere millions would not suffice. People would want to be told who his wife was; and for that question to be answered fitly she should be the daughter of a duke.

It was October when the new Lord Lashmar came back to the Castle, with a chosen company of bachelor friends, old comrades of Eton and Oxford. His lordship came only for a flying visit, to see his mother, to shoot the pheasants, and to look about him a little. Lordship at one-and-twenty could not be supposed to care for a long residence beside that broad reach of the Avon amidst the decay of autumn woods. When the pheasants were thinned, Lashmar would be off again, to Paris or Vienna, as the case might be. He affected to hate London and London society. It lacked the glitter and ease of Continental life. He was not going to that dreary barrack in Grosvenor Square until he was obliged; which would not be before February, when Parliament would re-open and he would go to take his seat in the House of Lords.

The dowager was at Lashmar to receive her son and his friends. She had not left the Castle since her step-son's death. Her presence had pervaded the mansion like a dark and brooding

cloud; or at least it seemed so to Stella, who shivered even at the distant sound of that voice. Not once had they two met face to face since the day when those cruel lips told the child of her bereavement; but it was enough misery for Stella to know that the stern ruler of the house was within its walls, to hear her deep-toned voice from afar.

Lady Lashmar was not alone when her son arrived. She did not want his house to seem empty and dismal after the brightness of his continental surroundings. She had summoned other two dowagers, one frisky, and one strong-minded, to bear her company. The strong-minded dowager, Lady Clan Allister, had two strong-minded daughters, and these also were bidden. Their presence made an excuse for having Clarice Danebrook continually at the Castle. The weather was lovely. It was not too cold for lawn tennis. A very feeble cousin of Miss Danebrook, who was reading for his Divinity examination, made a fourth. The dowagers had their books and newspapers, their work-bags, and that everlasting occupation of letter-writing which holds all society in bondage.

The frivolous dowager was the famous Oriana, Lady Hillborough, who had been young and a fashionable beauty when William the Fourth was king. She still wore her hair exactly as she had worn it at that period; but it was not the same hair—she had worn out a good many of those golden tresses, and had spent a small fortune at Truefitt's since the sailor king had been laid in the royal charnel house. She dressed as youthfully now as she had dressed then, and skipped about a room as gaily, re-arranging the furniture in that bright airy way of hers, famed for her exquisite taste in the composition of

those pictures which fashionable drawing-rooms now offer to the enlightened eye.

'My dear, you should have a group of large palms at the other end of your room,' she exclaimed, surveying Lady Lashmar's morning room through her binoculars. 'You have nothing to break the straight line of your end wall. Yes, of course, I know, those pictures of yours are priceless, and the palms will hide them; but you will get the idea of distance, vagueness, don't you know. The effect will be much finer.'

And then Lady Hillborough wheeled round and surveyed Clarice coolly, deliberately, through her glasses, which made her own eyes look as the eyes of a giant to those who happened to see them through those magnifying pebbles. Clarice was standing by the window, wondering whether she was to be presented to the new-comer, or to be ignored, which she would have infinitely preferred.

'What a sweet child!' said Lady Hillborough in a loud whisper, when she had stared for about three minutes. 'Introduce her to me.'

Lady Lashmar obeyed, and Oriana took Clarice by the hand, made another deliberate inspection at nearer range, and then kissed the girl enthusiastically on both cheeks.

'I delight in pretty people,' she exclaimed. 'Of course you know you are pretty, child. Some people try to keep girls of your age from finding out their own prettiness; but it's all wasted trouble. If a girl were brought up on a desert island she would know all about her good looks; she would see herself reflected in some pool, like What's-his-name, in the Greek story—Jonquil.'

'I think you must mean Narcissus, Lady Hillborough,' said one of the strong-minded Miss MacAllisters.

'What does it matter, my dear, a narcissus and a jonquil are much the same thing,' answered Oriana, who was not learned, and rarely read anything except the newspapers.

Lashmar and his friends arrived in time for dinner. He had spent a couple of nights in London, had arranged to meet his guests at the station, and to bring them down with him. There were two newly-fledged cavalry subalterns; a younger son who was going in for a political career, and fancied himself an embryo Canning; another younger son who was preparing himself for the family living; and a young man who was nobody in particular, but who was much better read, and more amusing than any of the other four.

They were all young, and they were a noisy crew. Clarice was afraid of them, and they were afraid of the two strong-minded Miss MacAllisters, who were intense politicians, and great upon the Eastern Question, with the complexities whereof they assailed the masculine mind at every opportunity. So there was a tacit avoidance of the feminine society provided by her ladyship.

'I thought you would have liked to find some nice girls here, Lashmar,' she said to her son reproachfully, after he and his friends had been out shooting all day, and in the smoking room all the evening, while the Miss MacAllisters, who scorned accomplishments as futile, had sat in different corners of the drawing-room, one reading Herbert Spenser, while the other devoured Darwin, and ostentatiously ignoring Clarice Danebrook's little bits of Chopin and dainty old ballads.

'So I should, mother,' answered Victorian cheerily, 'only I haven't seen any, except Clarice. She's nice enough, but quite impossible to get on with. She's so painfully shy.'

'Her shyness would be got over in a very short time if you'd only talk to her.'

'Oh, I can't talk to a girl when it's uphill work. The women in Vienna are so brilliant, so easy to get on with. As for your MacAllister girls I would as soon converse with a bluebook. One of them asked me yesterday morning what we were going to do with Cyprus, in the event of Eastern complications? Such a girl as that ought never to be allowed to set foot inside a country house. In fact, Oriana is the only agreeable person you have got about you. I have half a mind to propose to Oriana, only I'm afraid there'd be a sparsity of coin.'

The dowager sighed with a vexed air, but said no more. She had hoped that Lashmar, fresh from the meretricious charms of fashionable Viennese beauty, would have been struck by Clarice Danebrook's lily-like loveliness in all its purity of early girlhood. She was only eighteen, divinely fair, with features of most delicate mould, and eyes of heavenly azure. It was hardly possible to imagine a more beautiful girl in that particular style of beauty. There was not a flaw. She was of superior height, exquisitely graceful, with small hands and feet. Whatever coarseness there might have been in the Danebrook mould had been chastened by the judicious union with the Montmorencys. Nobody would ever have suspected Clarice of plebeian origin; and yet her father had coarse, hairy hands, and feet of serviceable breadth, sandy whiskers, and a potato nose. He was an admirable man of business, a liberal master, a staunch friend to the operatives whose labour had created his millions; but he had never tried or pretended to be a fine gentleman, though he had been born after his father had made a fortune, and had been educated at Rugby and Oxford.

Clarice was very sweet, and Lashmar gradually awakened to an idea of her sweetness. He began to leave his friends in the billiard-room, or the smoking-room, of an evening, and to sit by the piano listening to those quaint old ballads, and those melodious bits plucked here and there out of the heart of a sonata or a symphony. Clarice was one of those musicians by instinct rather than by training who wander from flower to flower with a sweet capriciousness, stealing the honey out of every blossom: now a joyous little bit of Mozart, a rondo or a minuet; now an Andante, or an Adagio from one of Beethoven's grandest sonatas; now one of Chopin's wild wailing movements, half a dirge and half a war-cry.

'What a jolly lot you know,' exclaimed Lashmar. 'I wish you'd sing "Barbara Allen" presently. I was outside in the corridor last night when you were singing it.'

'Mill has a passage here which seems exactly to hit our present complications,' said Janie MacAllister, looking up from her ponderous tome, 'I do wish you'd let me read it to you, Lord Lashmar.'

'Not for worlds. We should inevitably quarrel if you did. I detest Mill.

'But surely at such a crisis as this ——'

'I don't care a straw about the crisis; we are always at a crisis. I don't even know what it means. I get dosed with European politics abroad till I am simply imbecile upon all political questions. I want "Barbara Allen."'

Clarice looked up and smiled at him, with her sweet childish smile. The Miss MacAllisters had been far from civil to her, and she did not love them. They resented her inordinate wealth, and disapproved of her beauty. A rich girl had no right to be pretty. Lady Lashmar's favouritism was

also an offence. Clarice was petted and flattered while they were only tolerated—they who had cultivated their minds, and were able to enter the arena of argument upon equal terms with the sterner sex. The misfortune was that at Lashmar Castle nobody wanted to argue with them, except the foolish cousin, whose feeble brain they sometimes deigned to flood with their electric light. He who had never been able to grasp any one subject wondered at the wide range of these well-read damsels, who despised Paley with the contempt of long familiarity, and had Butler's Analogy at their fingers' ends, while the Greek Testament was child's play to them, and they were ready at a moment's warning to argue upon any disputed passage.

Clarice sang her old ballads, and Lashmar listened in a dreamy silence.

Yes, his mother was right. She was a very sweet girl—somewhat over-childish, perhaps, for her eighteen years, but passing lovely. Ermine robes and a coronet would not be too good for that delicate beauty. He wondered whether he was beginning to fall in love with her.

He fancied that she would be an easy conquest —for him. That shy and shrinking manner of hers argued a foregone conclusion. She had an awe-stricken way of looking up at him, as if his presence thrilled her. But he held himself in check, and did not mean to commit himself yet awhile. They were both young enough to wait.

One morning he let the shooters start without him, and strolled across the park and through the fields to the Hall, which was about a mile-and-a-half from the Castle. He wanted to see Clarice in the bosom of her family, to see whether her surroundings were too terrible, the father too suggestive of the original barrow. He had seen very little of

the Danebrooks in his boyhood. This passion for Clarice was a new craze of her ladyship's.

The Hall was everything which the Castle was not. It had been built five-and-twenty years before, in the midst of a level expanse of meadow land, which, during that quarter of a century, had been in process of education into a park. But as there had been very few old trees to begin with the park was still barren: a waste of level turf with new plantations dotted about at intervals. A fine carriage drive went from the lodge gates to the Hall door, assuredly the most uninteresting drive in the county.

The Hall was an immense red brick house, in the modern Gothic style, red brick with stone facings. It was a very fine house, well proportioned, in fairly good taste; but nothing that the architect could do had been enough to subjugate that terrible air of newness which is the bane of such houses. There was a huge battlemented tower, which stared over the surrounding country and could be seen from afar for many miles; and there were battlemented stables and battlemented terraces; and there were acres of well-kept shrubberies, and a fish-pond, and fountains, and spacious conservatories—in a word, there was everything that money could buy. But money cannot buy antiquity, unless it takes the past at second hand. Clarice was very sorry that her father had not bought a dear old crumbly house, in the heart of an overgrown old park, instead of building for himself this modern mansion, with all its comfortable appliances, its brand-new luxuries and conveniences, speaking-tubes and lifts, and hot water pipes and scientific ventilators. Clarice would rather have had one ghost than all those speaking-tubes; she would have preferred lichen-covered stone walls to hot-water pipes and ventilators.

Clarice fancied the house smelt of newly-made wealth. It had been furnished at one fell swoop by a great London firm, and although the picturesque had been duly considered, it was the modern picturesque, and lacked the mellow tones of real old furniture.

Mrs. Danebrook had just come in from her conservatories, where she snipped off the dead leaves and damaged a few of the plants every morning under the delusion that she was helping the head gardener. She was very stout, and could never steer herself through a conservatory without knocking over a pot or two. She was a large, placid woman, with small, regular features, which must have once been like those of Clarice, but which were now almost submerged in fat. She was very fair, with the lily-like fairness of her daughter, and she had flaxen hair, which her daughter had carried out in a richer and warmer tint of golden brown. The daughter seemed to Lashmar to be a refinement upon the mother; but he told himself that as the mother was the daughter might be five-and-twenty years hence.

He met his hostess in the hall, and she took him to her morning room, where Clarice was lolling in an easy chair by the window, reading a novel, which was about the highest form of literature wherewith the young lady ever nourished her ripening mind. She rose in confusion at sight of Lashmar, as it had been a demi-god entering suddenly; and the transparent skin was flooded with a lovely blush.

'My mother sent me to ask you over to tennis, this afternoon,' said Lashmar, inventing a message on the spur of the moment.

'Oh, but I was going in any case,' faltered Clarice; 'dear Lady Lashmar asked me last night.'

'She was afraid you would forget all about it to-day.'

'There is no chance of her forgetting,' said the mother. 'She is so fond of Lady Lashmar. I feel quite jealous sometimes. I hardly see anything of Clarice. But it is so nice for her to be at the Castle.'

Mrs. Danebrook, *née* Montmorency, had an exaggerated reverence for rank. In the days when she had been a half-pay colonel's daughter, struggling to keep up appearances upon the narrowest means, she had always taken comfort from the thought that she was descended from princes. She had held her head high before lodging-house keepers and small tradesmen; had worn mended gloves and bonnets of doubtful freshness with a proud complacency which overcame the scorn of middle-class prosperity. And when Providence smiled upon her fresh young charms in the person of the broad-shouldered, sandy-whiskered proprietor of the largest foundry in Brumm, who met the young lady at the Stillmington Hunt Ball and fell in love with her on the spot, Viola Montmorency received the advances of the millionaire with the placid dignity of a princess. Another girl in her position, conscious of shabby surroundings and an impecunious father, might have disgusted her admirer by unwise encouragement. Viola stimulated his affection by a sweet reticence; and it was the colonel who brought matters to a head, and anchored the delighted youth. Job Danebrook had never had occasion to repent his precipitancy. His wife had one of those exquisitely easy tempers which are perhaps only a refined form of selfishness, but which allow the wheels of daily life to run as upon velvet. Mr. Danebrook indulged his wife's every whim; but her whims were of the mildest kind, and he had in compensation the privilege of doing exactly what he liked under all circumstances. Danebrook Hall was therefore a kind of earthly

paradise, in which the fair young daughter moved like the spirit of youth and gladness, while the mother represented the calm contentment of maturity.

While Lashmar was dawdling in the morning room, turning over a pile of new novels and discussing their contents with Clarice, Mr. Danebrook came in from his model farm, fresh and breezy as the October morning itself, and bringing with him that compound odour of pigsty and stable which hovers about the person of amateur agriculturists, and in which they apparently delight.

It was Lord Lashmar's first visit to the Hall, and he was to Job Danebrook as a prey, to be dragged off at once and paraded through hot-houses and stables, home farm and paddocks, where the brood mares and their foals were one of the features of the estate. Lashmar was fond of horses, and did not mind the stables or the brood mares. He would have submitted even to the piggeries with a good grace if Clarice had been of the party; but Clarice never accompanied her father on these agricultural expeditions. She detested pigs and poultry, cattle sheds and farm yards. Those pretty little Louis Quatorze shoes of hers had not been made for tripping over cobbles, or across a ploughed field. There was nothing of the typical squire's daughter about her. She never hunted, and she only cared for the one well-trained horse which she was able to ride. She had never handled gun or fishing-rod, and her only idea of a dog was a Russian poodle. So Clarice stayed in the morning room and went on with her novel while Lashmar was inspecting horses and cows, pigs and poultry, until, amidst the splendours of a very fine assemblage of cochin-chinas, he was agreeably startled by the

sound of a gigantic gong, which might have been heard half a mile off.

'Lunch,' cried Danebrook; 'come along, Lord Lashmar, I hope you're as hungry as a hunter after this long round.'

'Upon my word I think I ought to go back to the Castle for luncheon,' said Lashmar dubiously. 'Her ladyship likes to have me when I am not out with the shooters. She'll take it unkindly perhaps.'

'No she won't, when you tell her where you've been. Her ladyship has been uncommonly friendly to my wife and daughter.'

'Miss Danebrook is my mother's favourite,' replied Lashmar. 'I never knew her take so warmly to any young lady.'

'And Clarice positively worships Lady Lashmar—quotes her in everything; nothing is right unless it is modelled upon Lashmar Castle.'

They went into luncheon, and Lashmar, who had rather despised Clarice for her stay-at-home metropolitan habits, forgave her when he compared her pure and delicate beauty with the bronzed and weather-beaten countenance and roughened hair of the average country-bred damsel.

After luncheon Lashmar proposed that Clarice should walk to the Castle with him, and although Mrs. Danebrook would hardly have seen the fitness of such a proposition from a commoner she was willing to stretch the proprieties just a little for the sake of a noble admirer, and to allow her daughter to stroll across the fields unchaperoned. So Lashmar and Clarice went across those rich Middleshire pastures, as gaily as Phillis and Strephon, in the sweet half-consciousness of dawning love, and were received most graciously by her ladyship.

The Miss MacAllisters and their mother had driven to meet the shooters, so there was only Oriana at home, and that dear lady always slept for two or three hours after luncheon, a siesta which enabled her to be as fresh as a *débutante* all the evening, nay, far into the small hours, did pleasure offer itself after midnight.

Lashmar and Clarice went off to the tennis ground and began a set without delay. The lawn was just under the windows of Lady Lashmar's morning room, and she looked up from the newspaper every now and then to watch them, pleased at the ripening of her plan. Yes, the fact was obvious. Lashmar was falling in love. No lesser influence than love would have taken him to the Hall; he who had always spoken slightingly of the newly rich, who detested the magnates and millionaires of Brumm. Clarice Danebrook's beauty and sweetness had conquered all his prejudices.

Clarice was indeed fair to look upon, with the soft curly auburn air fluttering on her low white forehead, and the gracious lines of her figure set off by the soft folds of her fawn-coloured Indian silk frock, a frock of elegant simplicity, just short enough to show the pretty little feet in the bronze shoes and fawn-coloured stockings, a frock whose Quakerish hue was relieved by a broad sash of Indian red, tied carelessly upon the left hip. The little toque hat was of the same Indian red, subdued yet glowing, and admirably harmonising with the ivory fairness of the wearer's skin.

They played two sets, and then went wandering off towards the Italian garden, which was at the other end of the castle, out of Lady Lashmar's ken.

It was upon this garden that the late Lord Lashmar's rooms opened. Clarice loitered to look in at one of the windows of the library.

'Oh, what a noble room!' she cried, peering in at the spacious apartment, with its wall of books facing her, crowned at intervals with white marble busts which gleamed in the shadowy interior. The room seemed in half darkness as seen from the bright clear light of the garden.

'Do you know I have never seen the famous Lashmar library,' she said, looking back at Lashmar. 'I should so like to see it.'

'Then you shall,' he answered cheerily. 'Strange that her ladyship should never have taken you in to look at the old Books of Hours and such like valuable rubbish. But the room has very sad associations for her, on account of my poor brother. He almost spent his life in that room.'

'Yes, I know. How very good and sweet he was—such a lovely, mournful face. I only saw him two or three times, but I thought him so nice. He spoke so kindly, he had such a beautiful manner. What became of that pretty little dark-eyed girl, he adopted? I saw her with him one day; such an interesting little thing.'

'Oh, she is still here, I believe, somewhere in the housekeeper's quarters,' Lashmar answered carelessly.

'How strange that I have never happened to see her!'

They went in at a glass door, which opened into the late Lord Lashmar's sitting-room. Nothing in this or any of his rooms had been altered since his death. Her ladyship meant to have a general turn-out of everything, and a complete re-arrangement of these rooms later on, when the sharp

sad feeling of recent death should have worn away. She was not altogether without feeling upon the subject; although she had always wished for Hubert's early death, as the best possible arrangement Providence could make for everybody, dear Hubert himself included.

Long life could not be a blessing in his case. He would have only felt his afflicted condition more keenly as the years rolled on.

Clarice looked at the room with a [illegible]ful, awe-stricken air. It was so simply and prettily furnished; such charming engravings and photographs of French and German pictures on the walls; such novel and artistic china and bronzes and quaint little ornaments of all kinds, scattered upon the tables; such delightful reading-lamps and reading-easels; such low, luxurious chairs; above all, such a snug, homelike air. It was difficult to realise that he by whom those things had all been chosen, whose hand had cut the leaves of yonder magazines with that elephant's tusk, thrown carelessly across the books, as if he had flung it there—difficult to realise that he had been lying in his grave for months, and would never look upon that place again.

The walls were lined half-way up with dwarf book-cases, and in those were the books of Hubert's own collecting. Clarice thought that some of these were passing dry; but that they were on the whole much better than those valuable volumes which Lashmar afterwards showed her in the great library.

He showed her the gems of the collection, in a somewhat perfunctory manner, not caring much about them himself, except as heirlooms, which fed his pride of race and place. He was well read for a young man; a keen critic of modern books;

had dipped into most things; but he had not the collector's reverence for old books and old bindings. Clarice looked at them with the wide, wondering eyes of perfect ignorance. That shabby little volume in Italian worth a thousand pounds, just because there were only two of them extant—this and one other. It seemed ridiculous. She had been surprised the other day when her father gave a thousand pounds for an Alderney cow; but the Alderney was at least beautiful, a sleek, pettable creature, with great pathetic eyes, while this little Italian book was distinctly ugly.

Her eyes wandered from the book to the room which was lovely. Those marble busts, placed at intervals along the richly-carved cornice of the book-cases; the splendour of cut velvet curtains shrouding the windows and making a semi-darkness in the room; the two sculptured fire-places, lofty and imposing—all these things impressed Clarice. The Hall had been built and furnished with a reckless expenditure, and yet there was no room in it that gave this idea of dignity and grandeur. 'One must begin by being noble before one could have such surroundings,' thought Clarice, who worshipped rank.

Suddenly, in the midst of her contemplation of the room, she gave a little start, and touched Lashmar lightly on the wrist.

'What is that?' she whispered.

'That' was a small fragile figure, a little girl in a black frock, sitting at the further end of the room, perched high up on a library ladder, reading a big volume, which it was as much as her small hands and thin little arms could do to hold in its place, hugged against her stooping chest.

'By Jove!' exclaimed Lashmar, 'it is the very child you were talking of, poor Hubert's *protégée*,' and he went to the other end of the room, followed

by Clarice, and looked up with a half-amused air at the queer little figure on the step-ladder.

'What are you doing up there, Stella?' he asked, not ill-naturedly.

The uncanny dark eyes looked down at him, so large, so black, in comparison with the small pale face; and then the thin black legs uncoiled themselves from the steps, and the child came down and faced her new master, still hugging the quarto in her lean arms. She stood and faced his lordship and the lovely young lady, looking with those great solemn eyes of hers from one to the other.

No longer a Reynolds's child, to be patronised and admired by the *dilettante* Rector. Not by any means a picturesque child in her present apparel. Her ladyship had taken pains to prevent any such foolishness under the new *régime*.

That thick straight fringe of hair, which had given quaintness to the childish face, had been carefully brushed away from the broad bare forehead, by command of her ladyship, who allowed no such meretricious grace as a "fringe" in any of her dependents. The black stuff frock was made with a Quaker plainness, tight and prim and spare, and a holland apron carried out the idea of dependence and servitude. A very plain child assuredly in her present stage of being.

'What book is that?' asked Lashmar, pointing to the quarto.

'La Morte d'Arthur,' she answered.

'What, can you read Old English?'

'Yes.'

'My brother taught you, I suppose?'

'Yes.'

'And pray, who gave you leave to come here to read?'

'Nobody.'

'Frank, at any rate. I suppose you know you are doing wrong when you come here?'

'No,' she answered doggedly. 'I don't hurt the books; I am not in anybody's way.'

'Do you suppose her ladyship would approve of your loafing here reading old books, instead of learning to be useful?'

'I don't care what her ladyship thinks. I don't care whether I please her or displease her. She has been very unkind to me.'

'Oh, but you must not say that,' said Lashmar, waxing stern. 'You have every reason to be grateful to her ladyship; but for her, you would be in he workhouse, perhaps.'

'If she was kind I should be grateful,' the girl answered resolutely, unabashed, looking at him boldly with those wondrous eyes. 'She took away all my books—the books Lord Lashmar gave me!'

The dark eyes filled with tears, which were hurriedly dashed away, as if the child were ashamed of them.

'Poor little thing!' murmured Clarice; and with a pretty pitiful air she patted the pale wet cheek with her soft white hand.

But Cinderella shrank from the touch as if she had been stung.

'Don't!' she cried angrily.

This last insolence provoked Lashmar's wrath.

'You are a very rude little girl,' he exclaimed, 'and you must never come into this room again. You have no right here or in any part of the house except the servants' quarters. You will have to be a servant by-and-by, and you must learn to live contentedly among servants. How did you get into this room? The doors are locked.'

'I came as you came—through the glass door.'

'You have been here often, I suppose?'

'Yes, very often.'

'You must never come again. Do you understand?

'I understand that you are a cruel man,' she answered defiantly, scowling at him, her heart beating tempestuously with fury. 'I am glad you are only my dear Lord Lashmar's half-brother. If you had been really his brother I should have been very sorry to hate you—but you are not his brother, and I don't care how much I hate you.'

She had been yearning for love and pity, thinking that perhaps when the new master came back he would be kind to her for his dead brother's sake. She had been yearning for pity; and yet she had recoiled from Miss Danebrook's gentle touch as if from an adder.

'You are a very horrid little person, as unpleasant as you are ugly,' said Lashmar, going to the door and unlocking it, and throwing it wide open; 'and now march, if you please. Put down that book, and make yourself scarce.'

She had been hugging the quarto all this time. She laid it slowly down on a table, and as slowly walked out of the room, scowling to the very last.

'I am afraid she is not a nice child,' said Clarice, shaking her head.

'She is a little demon, a veritable imp of darkness. I think my brother must have liked her on account of her outlandishness.'

'Just as some people like a *dachshund*,' said Clarice.

CHAPTER VIII

A YOUNG PROUD WOMAN THAT HAS WILL TO SAIL WITH

STELLA went no more to the library. She had stolen round one day by the garden when the family was at luncheon and the coast clear, and finding the glass door open had gone in and read there for hours, safe in the solitude of locked doors. No one had missed her, for she had of late been allowed to carry her needle-work to her own little room and to work there in peaceful loneliness between dinner and tea time. Day after day she had crept stealthily round from the hall door to that glass door in the late Lord Lashmar's study, left open for a few hours daily to air the rooms; and she had read to her heart's content, roaming at will among strange tales of fairy land and adventure, from Spenser to Sir Thomas Malory and Sir John Mandeville; and never had she been surprised until that afternoon when the new Lord Lashmar caught her in the act.

She felt herself a detected criminal; and she hated herself for the self-indulgence which had brought this shame upon her.

'I ought to have remembered that they are all *his* books now,' she thought. She had always thought of them before as belonging to her dead friend: she had not fairly realised the transitory character of all such possessions. They had been

Hubert's books, in her mind, and he had always encouraged her to read—he would not have grudged her the bliss of poring over those strange old stories.

She saw no more of Lord Lashmar, though he stayed at the castle till after Christmas, and entertained a good many visitors. The coming and going of guests occupied the servants much more severely than the old dull routine of the late lord's time, and gave Stella more leisure and seclusion. Soon after Christmas, there came a great improvement in her life, for Lady Lashmar and her son went up to Grosvenor Square for the season, taking with them the greater number of the servants. Three housemaids, and a superannuated housekeeper, who usually lived in one of the lodges, were left in sole charge of the castle: and one of those housemaids was Stella's faithful friend, Betsy.

Under this new *régime* the child was free to roam about the house as she pleased: but she never re-entered the library. She would have read her own books again and again to satiety rather than she would have degraded herself by entering that forbidden room after Lashmar's insulting veto.

She had not forgotten one of his hard words. It was not often that she looked in the glass; but she never did so look without remembering that he had told her she was as unpleasant as she was ugly. Yes, no doubt she was ugly. The glass confirmed that hard speech; and perhaps the charge of unpleasantness was equally well founded. One happy change came over her life in this wintry season of the year, when she was free to roam about the park or down by the river, or across the bare, bleak fields to the village, if she pleased. Her long imprisonment in ugly, uninteresting rooms had made that newly recovered liberty very precious to her.

She was perfectly fearless, cared not how far she went alone, and Betsy was too busy to look after her, and was always satisfied if she appeared punctually at meal time.

She revisited all the spots which she had known with Lord Lashmar. She went to the boat-house and looked at his empty boats, under linen coverings, ghastly, as if he were lying in one of them dead. She wandered along the river bank, stopping to note this or that landmark, and to remember how utterly happy she had been in those vanished days.

Would she ever be happy again, she wondered? Never, surely, unless her father were to come back from that far country whither he had gone that night the house was burnt, the name of which she did not know. She had often questioned Lord Lashmar, and he had evaded her questions, not unkindly, but still firmly.

'You will know by-and-by, dear child,' he had said, and she had felt that there was some mystery which concerned her absent father, and that she must be patient.

If he would but come back now—now when she felt so lonely, so sorely in need of love and sweet companionship; some one to talk to her and to teach her as Lashmar had done.

Comfort, of some kind, was nearer than she thought. Coming through the little village street one day she saw a familiar figure standing at the gate of a cottage garden, gazing dreamily at the old church tower nestling in a hollow just beyond that sharp curve and sudden drop in the narrow road where the village inn stood out conspicuously, as if on the look-out for accidents to horses and wheels.

A bent old figure, with bare head and long gray hair and dim, pale eyes, aged by poring over

dry-as-dust books. Yes, it was the mild companion of her happy childhood standing there, a leaf out of that lovely past which contrasted so strongly with her present desolation.

The girl ran to him and touched him on the sleeve.

'Mr. Verner, dear Mr. Verner, I am so glad!' she gasped breathlessly.

Slowly, and as if with an effort, the dim old eyes withdrew themselves from the church tower, and gazed wonderingly upon the pale young face looking eagerly upward.

'Why, Stella! Are you still at the Castle? They told me you had been sent to school. Why did not you come to see me before?'

'I was not allowed to go out till her ladyship went away, and I did not know you were here. They said you had gone to London.'

'They were right, my child,' answered the old man, with a profound sigh; 'I did go to London. I was in London nearly four months. A terrible place, child, a fearful place, when one has lost the habit of cities, as I have. The din of the crowded streets deafened me, the strange faces made me feel distraught. It is a dreary wilderness, Stella, for a man without friends; and I had no friends in London—no, not one. I thought I had many old college companions, old pupils—men who had pretended to love me when they were boys; but time had changed them into strangers. All doors were closed against me, very politely, Stella, but they were shut all the same, and I was alone and old and stupid, in that noisy wilderness of streets and squares, and fine shops, and lighted theatres. A dreary desert for the friendless and poor, Stella.'

'But your book,' faltered Stella, remembering the old man's shrinking from the burden of cele-

brity, '*that* will win you new friends instead of the old ones who may have forgotten you.'

'No, Stella, there are no friends to learning now-a-days. Francis Bacon might wander in that stony labyrinth, die of hunger there for want of a helping hand. There are no Bacons wanted now-a-days; learning is out of date. It was to get my book published that I went to London, Stella. I carried my manuscript from publisher to publisher, till I came to those that laughed in my face when I mentioned Aristotle, and asked me if I thought *he* was a likely kind of author to sell in penny numbers, or his complete works at a shilling? I was not to be beaten easily, Stella. I went to the great men first; they were kind and courteous, but told me the market was flooded with books upon the great classics; that no work of that kind had sold since Grote and Jowett; that my *magnum opus* was so much labour wasted, except for the pleasure I had felt in the progress of such an honourable work. That is the kind of thing the great publishers said to me. The small ones openly laughed at me—politely for rudely, as the nature of the creatures prompted. There was no room in the world of letters for my great work on Aristotle. I might publish the book at my own cost if I liked, but it would involve an outlay of two or three hundred pounds. And I had thought that the work would bring me wealth and renown; I had shrunk from the glare and the dazzle of my future fame. Dreams, Stella, all dreams! The publishers awakened me: and now I know that I am only a foolish old man, born into this world too late to be of any use to himself or other people.'

'But you have your book still,' said Stella, in her grave, old-fashioned way—she had grown from a child to a precocious woman in her solitary studious life of the last eight months, had changed curiously

in so short a time—'and if it is a great book, as Lord Lashmar said it was, you must be very proud of it.'

'I love it,' faltered the old man, with an involuntary glance at the window of the room that held his treasure,—'I love it as if it were a child. I am steadily going over all the old ground again, page by page, annotating, improving. Perhaps, years hence, when I am in the dust, a publisher may be found to print that book—the world may discover that I have left it an imperishable legacy. But let us talk of it no more. Come in doors, and rest yourself, Stella; it is too cold to be standing here so long.'

He led the way into a cottage parlour, littered with the chaotic lumber of a student's days and nights—a table crowded with pamphlets and papers, books piled in every available corner, heaped upon the floor; dust, untidiness everywhere. The owner of the cottage had given up the struggle for neatness, and had allowed her eccentric lodger to have things in his own way. He was not a troublesome lodger, needed but little attendance, never grumbled at the cooking, paid his way punctually; but his long night watches were a source of fear to his landlady, lest in long poring over those dry-as-dust old volumes he should fall asleep and suffer the house to be set on fire.

'Have you been living here long?' asked Stella looking at the chaos, and longing to put things straight with dexterous womanly fingers.

'Only since last November. Lord Lashmar has been good enough to give me a small pension, which I accept without compunction, as I know that my dear pupil always intended to provide for my old age. But how could he think that I should outlive him—the old surviving the young? Yes,

Lord Lashmar has been kind enough to provide for me, and I like to live here, near the old home and the old river we were all so fond of. And you, child, how has it fared with you since that fatal day?'

Stella was slow to answer. She struggled with herself in silence for a little while, the dark brows knitted in a frown; the crimson of passion kindling in the wan cheeks; and then she burst into tears.

The old man drew her towards him, gathered her upon his knees, sheltered her wet cheek upon his breast with almost maternal tenderness.

'My poor child! my poor child!' he murmured, 'death was very cruel to you and me that summer day.'

'Oh! if we had only died too! Why did not God take us all together?' sobbed Stella: and then in broken sentences she told Gabriel Verner what her life had been like since he left the Castle—a life spent among servants, in the bondage of menial servitude.

'She took away my books too,' Stella went on tearfully; 'the books he gave me; my Greek and Latin books; my book about the stars; and Scott and Tennyson.'

'Inexorable tyrant, to stifle that budding intellect.'

'But Betsy contrived to get some of them for me. It was almost like stealing them, though they were my own—as much my own as this hand and arm. And I have gone on learning my lessons, and writing exercises, though there has been no one to tell me the faults.'

'That need be so no longer, Stella. Come to me every day, if they will let you, and I will go on with your education. Yes,' cried the scholar, with sudden enthusiasm, 'it shall be the delight of my

life to train this bright young mind. You'—with the rapture of conferring an ineffable boon, 'you shall help me to annotate my book.'

'I will!' said Stella, 'and I will keep your room tidy, if you will let me. I know how to arrange books and papers, and keep them all in nice order, without disturbing anything. I used to tidy *his* papers when I was very, very little, when I could hardly reach up to the table.'

'Yes, dear, you were always a handy little thing. I will go on with your education. Come to me as often as you can; come whenever they will let you. I am not much of a gadabout. You will almost always find me at home.'

Stella thanked him with all her heart, cheered and comforted by this new light. To take up the thread of her education where Lashmar had dropped it would seem almost a link with the past, with the life that had been so sweet. It would bring her nearer to the dead. She thought of him always as watching over her from the spirit world, regretting her degradation. And it would please him to know that she was carrying on her education with his dear old tutor.

She told Betsy everything; and Betsy managed that by hook or by crook she should have time to go on with her education. All she had to do was to satisfy Middleham; and of late her sewing had been good enough even for that exacting personage; and she had also shown herself very deft and clever in putting the finishing touches to best bedrooms and morning rooms, arranging draperies, filling the flower vases, putting knick-knacks and indescribable elegancies in just the right places, instead of shoving things about stupidly after

the purblind manner of the ordinary housemaid. Stella had spent many a morning at this work when the Castle was full of company, and had won Middleham's blunt approval.

'I thought you were a fool, child, when I first took you in hand,' said the queen-mother of the housemaids; 'but I must say that I have found you a teachable, handy little thing, and very willing to take pains with your sewing; which is more than I can say for those overgrown young women from the village.'

The all-powerful Middleham being thus conciliated by patient service, life had been made easier for Stella, even at the worst, than it had been; but it was easiest of all for her now when Middleham and her staff were in Grosvenor Square, and the state rooms and best bedrooms were all wrapped in shadow and silence. Under Betsy's friendly rule Stella was able to spend the greater part of her days with Gabriel Verner, and to learn as much as he felt inclined to teach her. Nor was this little; for it was a delight to the old man to resume the habits of years gone by with so docile, so receptive a pupil.

So day by day and every day, as the leaves unfolded and the flowers came peeping forth in the hedgerows and meadows—first, the season of daffodils and then the season of king-cups, and then the glad time of blue-bells, and onward even to the first of the dog-roses—Stella lived her own life, and learnt diligently in the great volume of classic lore, till even those modern Middleshire copses, that river-side of to-day, seemed peopled with ideal forms: so interwoven became the fables of the past with the realities of the present. And every day the girl's care helped to make the old student's life more pleasant, providing for and forestalling his wants,

supervising his modest wardrobe, beautifying his cottage home, surrounding him with an atmosphere of womanly love and watchfulness.

Lady Lashmar was in London, in Paris, in Vienna, with her adored son, following him as a satellite follows a planet—not with him, but always near him. He had spoken in the House of Lords, and his speech had attracted attention; had been talked about as a wonderful speech for so young an orator: and it had been said by some of his party that Lord Lashmar was a young man who would make his mark.

'Old Lady Pitland's grandson ought to have something in him,' said the old-fashioned section of the party: and all Lady Lashmar's particular friends prophesied that old Lady Pitland's nephew was to be one of the lights of the future, and as political skies at this period were cloudy, lights were wanted.

CHAPTER IX

'BUT AS THE DAYS CHANGE MEN CHANGE TOO'

THE years had come and gone, and strange things had happened in the world of history and politics: wars and treaties, invasions and expeditions, changes in legislature, in science, in art. New whims, new fancies, new theories had rippled the river of time: but here at Lashmar Castle there had been no stirring events by which to distinguish the passing years. Life here had been monotonously placid and tranquil, yet not altogether happy. Lady Lashmar had drunk of the cup of disappointment in those slow years. Life had seemed to open with the

buoyant rapture of a wedding march, when Fate made her son master of Lashmar Castle. She who was accustomed to rule had thought it the most natural thing in the world that she should rule her only son; not with open domination, but with delicate diplomacy, with tenderest maternal management. Bitter had been her disappointment when she discovered that Lashmar was not so to be ruled. He was not an undutiful son. He treated his mother with affectionate consideration; but he was bent upon living his own life, and that was essentially a manly, independent life—a life of travel and sport. Yachting, mountaineering, salmon fishing in Canada, bear hunting in the Rockies, deer-stalking in the Highlands, had taken him far from his mother, and the possibility of maternal guidance. Within the last two years he had taken ardently to politics: but even political life was a life of severance from her ladyship, who was no longer in the vigour of health and strength, no longer able to hold her own in the turmoil of London society—a great deal faster and more furious, more capricious, fickle, and volatile than the society of Lady Pitland's time.

A great change had come over Lady Pitland's daughter within the seven years that had passed since Hubert, Lord Lashmar, had been laid in the family vault yonder, under the old church at the end of the park. The hand of affliction had weighed heavily on that proud spirit. Lady Lashmar's health had given way; a slow and gradual depression, indicative, as her physician blandly hinted, of some obscure inward malady, had crept over that active mind, working slow and subtle changes, until little by little, with a gradual transformation hardly perceived by those who were constantly about her, the Lady Lashmar of the present had become an

entirely different woman from the Lady Lashmar of the past. The severe lines of that handsome face had softened with the premature whitening of those soft masses of hair, which now recalled the Marie-Antoinette of Delaroche's famous picture. Yet despite this softer aspect the woman was at heart the same: proud as Milton's Satan, but with the melancholy pride of a disappointed life.

There had been times when she regretted her dead stepson; regretted the old days in which her influence had been paramount, and her boy, as a younger son with his own way to make in the world had been dependent upon the maternal purse for all his pleasures and indulgences. She had longed then for the day when he should stand in his brother's place. That day had come; and it had been the beginning of severance. Her boy was no longer to be gratified by gifts from the maternal hoard; he had no longer need of the maternal influence and counsel in the difficult career of a younger son. He was his own master, rich, titled, with very little incentive to the creation of a career.

For five years Lady Lashmar watched her son's idle wanderings with disappointment and anxiety. She began to fear that he was no better than other young men to whom fortune has given too much, and with whom ambition is a dead letter. She was beginning to despair of him, when there came a political crisis, and Lord Lashmar came suddenly to the front. The Conservatives had braced themselves together for a final effort against a Liberal Government of five years' standing—a Government which its enemies declared to have afforded the most disastrous example of misrule ever known in the history of parliamentary legislature, and which its friends descanted upon blandly as a reign of peace and

prosperity, and, as it were, a perpetual symposium of recumbent lambs and lions. Much in this crisis turned upon the acceptance or rejection of an important measure in the House of Lords: and it was then that Lashmar girded up his loins, and stood up in his place among the graybearded tribunes, and spoke as men seldom speak in that austere assembly, spoke with the fire and freshness, the vigour and the strong feeling of inexperienced youth. The speech took his fellow-peers by surprise—all the more since the young peer had never had that training in the Lower House without which it is popularly supposed that no man can ever be a good debater. Lashmar awoke next morning to find himself a politician with a reputation. The bill went back to the Commons: and Mr. Nestorius, smarting under the sense of defeat, threw himself upon the country, just at that critical hour when his popularity was on the wane. Nothing can be more fatal than to dissolve Parliament on an ebb tide. The Conservatives came in with triumph; to their own exceeding surprise.

All this had happened two years ago, and now Lord Lashmar was a power in the Upper House, and occupied a position of some importance in the political and social world. He was one of those young men of mark about whose matrimonial views people speculate freely. Society wondered when and whom he would marry. Who was there good enough for him in these days of lamentable decadence? This question generally resolved itself into a discussion as to which of the heiresses of the year would have most money; since it appeared obvious that Lord Lashmar would require money.

Seven years had gone by since Clarice Danebrook had played tennis on the lawn under Lady Lashmar's windows; and nothing had come of her ladyship's hopes in that direction. Clarice and Lord Lashmar

had seen a good deal of each other in the London season which followed those quiet autumn days at the Castle. They had waltzed many a waltz, had met in many a crush upon the staircases of Belgravia and May Fair. They had even ridden side by side in the Row, Job Danebrook jogging quietly beside them on his weight-carrier, thinking of his latest improvements in machinery, or the possibility of a strike amongst his operatives.

People had said that young Lord Lashmar was anchored already. The worldly wise had lauded Lady Lashmar's good management. Just what one would expect from a daughter of old Lady Pitland. But nothing came of these rides and these waltzes after all. Lashmar went back to the Continent without having compromised himself by one too-tender word. There had been magnetic looks and gentle hand pressures, on the impulse of the moment, when they two stood side by side amidst the crowd, nestling together, as it were, under the pressure of that silken throng, in an atmosphere overcharged with the scent of gardenias and tuber-roses. There had been looks that had thrilled the simple Middleshire maiden; but nothing had come of those tender glances from dark gray eyes, under heavy brown brows.

Lord Lashmar had gone away, deeming that it was too soon for him to avow himself. He was not quite sure. He wanted time. And Clarice was assuredly too young to know her own mind. Precipitancy in these matters is always dangerous, often fatal; but there is seldom harm in delay.

He went, and he left Clarice lamenting, like Ariadne at Naxos: and, like Ariadne, she found a consoler.

She had been very fond of Lord Lashmar in her mild, almost infantine, way: and she had set

her heart upon being a peeress. Perhaps she worshipped him chiefly because he was a nobleman of ancient race and high standing. She had seen him from the first invested with that aureole which her mother had taught her to revere—the golden halo of hereditary rank. And now he was gone, and she felt heart-broken, disappointed, crushed. Her mother also was disappointed, and did not conceal her feelings. She told Clarice that Lord Lashmar had behaved shamefully, and that he was unworthy of a moment's thought. Notwithstanding which Clarice thought of him during almost every moment of the day and many a wakeful hour of the night; until the appearance of a new admirer of still higher rank afforded a spurious kind of consolation.

The new admirer was Lord Carminow, a marquis, and one of the most dissipated young men in London or Paris; a young man who, a year before he met Clarice, had the reputation of being industriously engaged in drinking himself to death; but who was said to have pulled up, on the brink of the precipice, as it were, and to be in a fair way to reform. His hand was still very shaky, and he was still obliged to put cayenne pepper in his brandy: but he drank less brandy, and his hand was less tremulous than it had been last year.

Lord Carminow met Clarice and her family at Schwalbach, whither Mr. and Mrs. Danebrook had taken their daughter with the idea that iron would revive her broken spirits. Lord Carminow was there, also in quest of iron. The marquis and the maiden drank the waters together, and sat side by side to hear the band play in the gardens of the little casino. He was *not* an intellectual young man, and brain and nerves were alike shattered by long-established habits of intemperance. At an age when

other men are in the morning of life, he was old and broken. It was a melancholy spectacle, piteous in the eyes of Mrs. Danebrook, who never for a moment forgot that the poor shaking hand belonged to a marquis. She was infinitely sorry for him sorrowful, yet not without hope; for she told herself and all her intimate friends that if he could only marry a girl who loved him, he would no doubt become a new man. He was already on the right road. All he needed was to have his footsteps sustained by a faithful arm, his days cheered by sweet companionship

After three weeks' acquaintance he proposed to Clarice Danebrook, and was accepted, with a kind of haughty carelessness on the part of the young lady, as if she took this coronet as her due, and despised the giver; with rapture on the part of the mother; but by the father with considerable and even outspoken reluctance.

'I suppose the world will say that my little girl is making a fine match!' said honest Job Danebrook, 'but unless you mend your habits, Lord Carminow, she will be one of the most miserable wives in London.'

Carminow swore that his habits were already mended; and that with Clarice for his wife there could be no fear of relapse. The wedding took place late in the autumn, much to Lady Lashmar's indignation. She had done all in her power to deter Clarice; had told her in plainest language what manner of life Lord Carminow had been leading since he left Oxford and even at Oxford; but Clarice had made up her mind to be a marchioness, and she was marble.

'He is very good-natured, and he is a gentleman,' she said; 'I can afford to take my chance. I shall do all I can to reform him.'

'*You!*' cried her ladyship, surveying her from

head to foot with a scathing look. 'Poor baby! you little know what you are undertaking.'

Clarice took her chance, and enrolled herself for ever among the marchionesses of England. She endured three and a half years of a most intolerable existence, before Lord Carminow finished that business of drinking himself to death, which he had begun so blithely at Christ Church, in the dawn of manhood, when many of his fellow-commoners took toast-and-water for their dinner beverage. He was gone, and Job Danebrook was gone, and Clarice, Marchioness of Carminow, was established at Danebrook Hall, inordinately rich, and as lovely as in her earliest girlhood. Mrs. Danebrook lived with her daughter, and had been left very well off by the iron-master; but Clarice was mistress in all things, and a mistress on a very grand scale, modelling herself upon the great Lady Pitland, about whose little ways she had heard so much from Lady Lashmar.

There had been no issue of that unhappy union, and a distant cousin of Lord Carminow had succeeded to the marquisate—an elderly man with a large family, who swooped down upon the estate like a flight of vultures, devouring everything. There was only a pittance of seven thousand a year for the widowed Marchioness, an insignificant addition to her own enormous income. The new marchioness and her daughters thought she ought not to have taken that pittance.

And now in these days of her widowhood Clarice was again almost as a daughter to Lady Lashmar, who had much need of solace and society in her present depressed state of health; need also of much attendance, wanting to be waited upon with exemplary patience, altogether a hard and difficult mistress.

She had three slaves, who were always in attendance upon her—Barker, the patient and homely

maid of thirty years' service; Celestine, the expert Abigail, with deft fingers and faultless taste in the *confection* of a cap or the arrangement of a drapery, were it only the sweeping folds of an Indian shawl worn over an invalid's shoulders. Lady Lashmar had taken to dress as elderly women dress when they have renounced the pomps and vanities of the world. She rarely wore anything but black brocade or velvet, and she wore a cap, and generally had her shoulders draped with some rich shawl. She looked distinguished still; but she always looked old, and she very often looked ill.

Her third attendant occupied a nondescript position, was hardly a servant, though she was treated quite as cavalierly as the lowest servant, and was not quite a companion. She was a tall and slender girl, with a pale olive complexion, a small head crowned with ebon hair, and the most wonderful dark eyes that were ever seen out of Andalusia. She was always dressed with a severe simplicity, in a black cashmere gown, high to the throat, with a small linen collar, and a long plain skirt. This was as much a uniform with her as it was with the housemaids, whose afternoon gowns were just of the same colour and fashion; yet no one would have taken her for anything but a lady. There was a distinctive grace and dignity in every line of the tall, straight figure. The head had the imperial carriage of a Cleopatra.

This was Stella Boldwood, now nineteen years of age, and promoted within the last two years to the post of her ladyship's reader and amanuensis.

Not of her own accord, but very reluctantly, had Lady Lashmar accepted her stepson's *protégée* in this intimate familiarity. The girl had been forced upon her by circumstances and the officiousness of her other dependents. The time had come

when she, who had been a great reader, had begun to feel the fatigue of reading too much for her broken nerves—the time had come when a chronic languor made it an effort to her to hold a book or follow the lines of a page. She was only fit to recline in her easy chair and listen while some subdued voice read aloud to her, and the accents of that voice must be those of refinement.

Celestine was, of course, impossible for English reading, and the twang of her original faubourg made even her French detestable to her ladyship's sensitive ear. Barker was worse. The doctor suggested Stella, whom he had seen very often when sitting in the cottage parlour, where he dropped in once or twice a week to chat with old Gabriel Verner. He had attended the old man every winter during sharp attacks of bronchitis, and he had seen how Stella excelled as a nurse.

'I know something of the young lady,' said Mr. Stokes.

'Please don't call her a young lady, my good Stokes,' remonstrated her ladyship, 'she has been brought up among servants, as a servant. You must remember how I disapproved of my poor step-son's folly about that girl.'

'You may bring up a fox in a litter of terriers, but he'll be Reynard all the same at the end of the chapter,' said Mr. Stokes. 'That girl is a lady. She has good blood in her veins, I'll go bail. And she got her early training from the late Lord Lashmar, who was one of the most intellectual men I ever had the honour to know. You can't undo that, Lady Lashmar. You may order the girl to handle a broom and twirl a mop, and she may think it her duty to obey you, but she is a lady all the same.'

'I think all girls are ladies now-a-days,' retorted the invalid impatiently. 'A great wave of refine-

ment has swept over our people. Even country girls are no longer buxom and sturdy and active. They are all pallid, and languid, and lady-like, stuffed with science primers and fine notions, and they want to do as little work as possible. I suppose we must call this paragon of yours a lady-help. I want some one to read to me, but unfortunately I dislike that girl of yours.

'Prejudice, Lady Lashmar, idle prejudice,' replied Mr. Stokes, who always said what he liked to her ladyship. 'Let her make a beginning, and if you find her disagreeable you can send her about her business.'

'Of course,' answered Lady Lashmar. 'Perhaps she may be rather more endurable than a stranger. I abhor strangers.'

So Stella was told one morning that her mission would be to act as Lady Lashmar's reader and amanuensis until further notice; and from that hour she was a slave.

Her life had been easy enough of late years, easy even to pleasantness. The rule of the uncompromising Middleham had been made very light for her, when that autocratic personage found that she was willing, industrious and conscientious, and that whatever she did was well done. She had been able, by early rising, to get her work done before the one o'clock dinner; and then she had been allowed to do what she liked with her afternoons, always provided she reappeared at the five o'clock tea, which of late she had taken with Mrs. Barker in the little room upstairs, a priceless privilege, since it spared her the gossip and uncongenial joviality of the still-room. Little by little the girl had drifted, as it were, into a life of her own, apart from those servants whose existence the dowager wished her to share. She had been among them for a little while, but she had never

been one of them. As she grew into girlhood the difference between her and them became more sharply defined. They felt that she could never be one of them, and her presence became an embarrassment. They were very glad that she preferred solitude to their friendly company, and a quiet cup of tea in Barker's room to their own noisy meal. She had always such old-fashioned ways, they said. Strange that a child should be such a blue-stocking. But of ccurse that was all the late Lord Lashmar's doing. He had brought her up as no child ever was brought up before. She had been dry-nursed upon books.

As the years wore on Stella was almost happy. The afternoon hours of every day were spent with Gabriel Verner. He was old and feeble, and sometimes very prosy; but he was a mine of information, he loved learning for learning's sake, and he loved Stella. He carried on her education from the point at which Lord Lashmar had left off. He cultivated her love of the classics, reading Homer and Virgil and Horace with her again and again, dwelling on the passages he loved, ingraining their beauties into the very mind of his pupil. He taught her French and German, and together they read the classics in both languages. They had nothing to distract them from their books, no visitors, no pleasures. In summer time they sat in a quiet spot on the edge of the river, a little nook below the towing path, out of everyone's way, under a willow which Lashmar had loved. In winter they sat opposite each other by the trimly kept hearth, like two old cronies.

It is wonderful how much reading may be got through in seven years by a young enthusiast and a veteran student, when the world has no claims upon either, and offers no temptations to youth or age. Stella had read more than many

fairly cultivated men of forty, when she was suddenly called upon to do suit and service to Lady Lashmar. From this time her regular studies with Gabriel Verner were at an end, and those gentle cares of hers which had made his old age so easy had now to be performed under difficulties. She could only steal away from the castle now and then for a brief visit to her old friend, just time enough to see to his comforts and to talk to his landlady, who was kindly but stupid, and whom Stella had been gradually training into proper carefulness of her lodger.

'You do spoil the old gentleman so, miss,' remonstrated the good soul.

'Old people require a little spoiling, Mrs. Chipp. But nobody could spoil Mr. Verner. He is so good and so unselfish.'

'Well, miss, nobody can deny that he is a nice easy gentleman to get on with, and if I wasn't afraid of his setting the house on fire I should say he was the best lodger I ever had; much better than they young curates as most people set such store by; and a permanence too, which the best of curates never was.'

'You must be more attentive to him than ever, Mrs. Chipp, now that I am so seldom here,' urged Stella; and Mrs. Chipp promised that the student should lack no fostering care.

It was with a rebellious heart that Stella entered Lady Lashmar's morning room on the first day of her new service. Mr. Stokes had endeavoured to awaken her sympathy for the stern dowager. He had hinted to her that the disease from which Lady Lashmar suffered must sooner or later be fatal, that all the rest of her life must be spent under the shadow of affliction.

'She is very much to be pitied, poor soul,' said the kindly Stokes; 'all the more so, perhaps, because she is not the kind of woman to invite pity.'

Yet even after this appeal Stella felt nothing but aversion as she stood, tall and straight as a lily stalk, at the foot of her ladyship's sofa.

She was thinking of that summer afternoon seven years ago when Lady Lashmar had sat beside her bed, swathed in inky crape, stern, pitiless, and had told her of her benefactor's death—how all life and this bright world had changed to darkness at the sound of that cruel voice. Yes, it was the same face—cold, faultless, unbeautiful, looking at her with disdainful eyes.

She had not been face to face with Lady Lashmar since that dreadful day. She had lived under her roof and eaten her bread, and had felt the sting of her tyranny; but the mistress of the Castle had been no more visible to her than the Mikado to the meanest of his subjects. And now she looked at her oppressor thoughtfully in the June sunlight, noting the changes time had wrought.

Yes, it was the same countenance, in nowise softened by affliction; but the hair was white, and there were traces of suffering and of premature age.

'I require a person to read to me for some hours daily, sometimes even late at night; and I am told that you have contrived to educate yourself with Mr. Verner's help, and that you know how to read aloud. Is this so?'

'I have read aloud to Mr. Verner,' the girl answered quietly.

'Often?'

'Habitually.'

There was no waste of words on either side.

'Then you can begin at once. There are my books' (pointing to a revolving bookstand within reach of the sofa, a stand which held about forty volumes). 'Invalids are very capricious, and require change of mental food. You can begin with Charles

Lamb, Elia's Essays—that one upon old china, for instance. I am in a lazy mood to-day, and would rather not be called upon to think.'

She was lying on a luxurious sofa, propped up with pillows. She spent a considerable portion of every day in this recumbent position, but she was not confined to her sofa or to her room; and when there was company at the Castle, or when her son was at home, she generally dined downstairs, and held her own with the old air of supremacy which had been to her as a royal robe. She was not easily to be beaten even by bodily pain, or the vague languors of obscure disease. She meant to make a good fight to the end.

Stella seated herself in a low chair a little way from the sofa, and began to read. She read Lamb for an hour, and then she was told to lay aside Lamb and to take up a volume of travels in Bokhara, a new book which her ladyship had just received; and when the travels wearied she was told to resume the last poem by Browning, at the page which her ladyship had marked.

She was allowed to read on like a machine. She read for three hours without respite, and then she was told that she might go.

'You read very well!' said her ladyship, with cold approval; 'I daresay I shall want you again late in the evening. Stay, you can arrange my pillows before you go.'

Stella bent over the white Marie-Antoinette head, and with light and careful touch adjusted the heaped-up pillows, and then, without a word of thanks from the invalid, she left the room.

As she went out by one door Barker entered by another.

'Yes, I think she will do!' said Lady Lashmar. 'She has a sympathetic voice, and reads well. This

is one of my bad days, Barker; I shall not leave my room.'

At nine in the evening Stella was summoned again. The lamplit room with its profusion of roses seemed a revelation of long-forgotten beauty and elegance, after the puritanical plainness of the servant's quarters. The golden-brown brocade curtains and clouds of Indian muslin draping the fine old windows, the rich carmine of old Sèvres vases and candelabra, the Chippendale whatnots crowded with richly bound books, the low chairs and dainty little tables offering every possible form of convenience for books, or flowers, or cup and saucer; the old Indian screen and tall young palms in Satsuma bowls. Such surroundings were new to Stella, after the prim commonness of the housekeeper's parlour, with its horsehair sofa and pembroke table; and yet she felt more at home here than in Mrs. Middleham's room.

Lady Lashmar looked wan and faded in the lamplight, and the sickly white of her complexion was accentuated by the rich dark tints in her brown plush tea gown. A diamond and sapphire brooch fastened her fichu of old English lace, and the semi-transparent hands glittered with costliest rings. There was here no intention of letting down the pride of womanhood or station, even under the grip of a fatal malady.

'You can go on with Balaustian!' she said.

Not a word more. No praise or thanks for the afternoon's work; no invitation to take a cup of tea from the old silver salver, placed handily on the delicious little tea-table beside her ladyship's sofa. Jonathan Boldwood's daughter was to be treated only as a serf beneath that roof. She had been reared there according to the laws of slavery; and there is no reason that a slave should be treated any better because he happens to have cultivated his intellect.

She read till eleven, without any sign of fatigue. She had so trained herself during those long afternoons when she had sat on a stool at the old student's feet, reading the authors he loved; saving the poor old faded eyes. She had read on unconscious of the passage of time, just as she read now, absorbed by her own delight in Browning's verse, with its undertones of deepest thought.

At eleven Lady Lashmar dismissed her, with briefest good-night.

Her duties as reader went on for months, without variation. She spent at least half of every day in Lady Lashmar's rooms, and was often summoned late at night to sit beside her ladyship's bed, and to read till three or four o'clock in the morning. She performed her task with a cold placidity which was agreeable to the highbred dowager, who detested fuss, and would have been disgusted by servility or officiousness. Later on Lady Lashmar allowed her slave to write all her letters to indifferent persons, and sometimes even a letter of friendship; but the amanuensis was never employed in writing to her ladyship's son. Those letters were always in the mother's penmanship.

Stella had filled this office for nearly two years, and had been of the utmost service to Lady Lashmar. Yet the stern dowager had but in the smallest measure relented of her original aversion from her stepson's *protégée*. She used her as a companion and slave, but she never forgot that this thoughtful-looking girl with the large dark eyes was Jonathan Boldwood's daughter, and that the venom of Radicalism ran in those blue veins which showed in such delicate tracery upon the slim white hands and on the ivory pallor of the forehead. The old prejudice still existed in full force, and the dowager in nowise relaxed her

hauteur because Stella Boldwood had become useful to her. In her inmost heart she was angry with the girl for the very gifts which made her an invaluable companion. She resented that force of character which had enabled the child-dependent to rise superior to her surroundings, and to make herself a lady in manners and superior to most ladies in education. She was angry at that native grace, which gave elegance even to the black merino gown which was the livery of servitude. Nothing could vulgarise Stella, or reduce her to the level of her ladyship's other dependents. Barker had one day ventured to suggest that as the girl was now virtually her ladyship's companion she should have some prettier gowns—a black silk, for instance, or at any rate, one of those fine French alpacas which Celestine always wore, a material which combined all the lustre and softness of silk with the merit of never wearing out. But Lady Lashmar replied angrily that the girl was to wear such gowns as the housemaids wore and no other.

'She is quite vain enough as it is,' said her ladyship. 'I believe she spends hours in dressing that hair of hers, and training her eyebrows.'

This was a cruel attack upon Stella's pencilled brows, whose bold clear line gave such character to the low broad forehead.

Barker was indignant at this ungenerous treatment of a girl who sat up till two or three o'clock in the morning three times a week on an average to beguile the tedium of her ladyship's wakeful nights. But Stella made no complaint against the inevitable black merino gown. She was glad when for the convenience of Lady Lashmar she was transferred to a pretty little bedchamber on the principal floor, close to Barker's den, where she now took all her meals, and which she was allowed to use as her own

sitting-room. She was thus removed entirely from all association with the other servants: and Barker was one of those kindly souls who with but the slightest modicum of education have all the instincts of good breeding. Stella had never revolted against the society of Barker, while Barker's niece Betsy was always dear to her as the friend of her childhood.

And now it was the end of September, and Lord Lashmar and a little knot of distinguished visitors were expected at the Castle, some intent on the slaughter of the pheasants, others only desiring rest and respite after the fatigues of a London season.

Among these latter was Mr. Nestorius, the great party-leader, who having retired from political life finally, after the defeat of his Ministry, now, like Dante's swimmer, looked back, breathless after striving with the waves, upon the raging sea of politics from the calm shore of domesticity.

Nestorius had been a *protégé* of Lady Pitland when his brilliant career was in its dawn; and the friendship with that wonderful old lady and her family had never been interrupted, albeit their political opinions were as the poles asunder. And now that the politician's distinguished career was a closed book, and that he had withdrawn into the haven of private life, without the faintest intention of ever refitting his damaged craft again to encounter the buffets of ocean, it pleased Lady Lashmar that the great man should enjoy some portion of his well-earned leisure under her roof.

She talked of him beforehand more than of any other of her guests, and arranged that the very best of the best rooms should be given to him.

'There are cases in which rank counts for nothing,' she said. 'Mr. Nestorius must always

be first everywhere. He is not only great as a statesman; he has won his laurels as a poet, and the interpreter of classic poetry; and our respect is all the more due to him since he has retired from office for ever—always a melancholy fact to consider when a career has been so great, although so mistaken.'

'Is there no possibility of Mr. Nestorius returning to public life, whenever the Liberals come into power again?' asked Stella simply.

Lady Lashmar gave her a look which ought to have frozen her.

'The Liberals have seen the last of their misrule,' she said. 'The country has been taught a lesson which it is not likely to forget.'

'Yet history shows that people always do forget,' argued Stella. 'Opinion follows opinion, as wave follows wave; the world would stagnate if it were otherwise.'

'Pray do not argue. I do not care for Mr. Verner's ideas at secondhand,' said Lady Lashmar haughtily.

She encouraged the girl to talk sometimes, snubbed her mercilessly at other times, and was never really kind. Yet it so happened that this kind of life, slavery as it was, suited Stella's temperament. Good books and gracious surroundings were at present her only idea of bliss in this world: and as Lady Lashmar's companion she had these in abundance—the best of books, old and new, elegant rooms to live in, and the right to wander at will in gardens or park during her brief intervals of leisure. For the rest she was penniless, had no remuneration for her labour, not even the wages of an underhousemaid; and now that Mr. Nestorius and other great people were bidden to the Castle, Stella knew that her servitude would be in no way

altered, that she would see little or nothing of those great ones. She sat at the little writing table in the window of her ladyship's morning room, waiting for further orders, while Lady Lashmar and the beautiful widow, Lady Carminow, sat on each side of the hearth, brightened by the glow of a small wood fire, and discussed the expected visitors.

'Remember, you are on no account to desert me while these people are in the house,' said Lady Lashmar, with an imperative air, almost as a mother talking to a daughter. 'I shall expect you to take nearly all the trouble of receiving them off my hands; you must be almost as the mistress of the house.'

'It will be very nice,' answered Clarice, with her slow, dreamy smile. 'I adore Mr. Nestorius, though I know he did his utmost to ruin this country when he was in power; but he is such an orator, the finest I am told, since Lord Chatham; and he is such a thoroughly poetical man, and such a scholar! His translation of Æschylus is quite too lovely. I am sure it must be ever so much nicer than the original.'

Stella's lips moved, and a little impulsive movement disturbed the repose of her attitude. She had discussed this translation of Mr. Nestorius's with Gabriel Verner. They had gone over it line by line and it had seemed to them that the Agamemnon of Mr. Nestorius was a treason against the Greek playwright, so fully had the statesman given the reins to his own vivid imagination; but it was not for her to give utterance to her doubts in that room, or to air her knowledge of Greek before Lady Carminow.

'I am getting some new frocks on purpose for your people,' said Clarice, who was fonder of millinery than of literature.

The only books she really enjoyed were French

novels, and the newest school of English poetry. Her intellectual fibre had a certain limpness which required to be shocked and startled into attention. She went to sleep over Tennyson or Browning, and George Eliot made her head ache.

'Who is making your frocks?' asked Lady Lashmar, faintly interested.

'Mrs. Marshall.'

'She is very good, but a desperate robber. Her prices are iniquitous.'

'But she drapes a gown so deliciously. There is an indescribable something which is worth any money she likes to charge. I never grumble at her bills. I have even gone so far as to shake hands with her when I have wanted a gown in a desperate hurry.'

'How long is it since you have seen Victorian?' asked Lady Lashmar absently, as if her thoughts had wandered ever so far from Mrs. Marshall's bills.

'Oh! ages and ages; not since the spring. Yes, once in the summer, at a crush at the Foreign Office. We had five minutes together on the stairs; five minutes that brought back the thought of old times, before I married poor Lord Carminow. I felt as if I were a girl again.'

'You are not much more than a girl. He was very attentive, I suppose?'

'Oh! he said some rather sweet things; but sweet things are only the small change of society now-a-days. They mean no more than the crystallised violets one nibbles at dessert. Lord Lashmar is a great man, quite absorbed in politics.'

'I hope he will never become a walking blue-book like some of them!' said Lady Lashmar vaguely. 'I am proud that he should make his mark in the world; but I should like to see his domestic happiness secure before I die.'

'Dearest Lady Lashmar, pray do not talk of dying. You have a long life still before you, I hope.'

'I should be glad to hope so too, if I could, Clarice; but I can't. I am obliged to adopt the Horatian philosophy—abjure extended hopes, and enjoy my life as much as I can in the present. I want to see my son married, and married as I should wish!'

'That is just the one thing you must not hope for,' answered Clarice, with a touch of bitterness, as if that placid temper of hers were faintly stirred by the memory of an old wrong. 'Men never marry to please their fathers and mothers; and the sons who have had ideal fathers and mothers are almost sure to marry badly. It is only the men who have seen a cat-and-dog life exemplified in their parents who are careful in choosing their own wives.'

'It would break my heart if Victorian were to marry beneath him.'

'Oh! I don't suppose he will do *that*,' said Clarice, with supreme hauteur. 'He will marry in his own rank, I have no doubt. He has none of those horrid low instincts which lead young men to make friends of their stablemen and to admire chorus-girls. But he may marry a woman who has been more talked about than you would like; although as so many women of fashion are talked about now-a-days that would hardly be supposed to matter.'

'It would matter very much to me, Clarice,' answered the dowager sternly. 'I wonder you can talk so lightly!'

'I only talk as other people talk. Things do not count now as they used when my mother was young and Prince Albert was alive. Is it not strange that one good man's death seems to have

loosened all the bonds that held society together? At least, mother says it is so. She puts our moral decadence all down to the untimely death of the Prince Consort.'

Stella was often a quiet hearer during such conversations. Her presence counted for nothing. Lady Lashmar and Clarice talked as freely before her as if she had been a footman. She was not of their rank or of their world, and so was in a manner non-existent. Lady Carminow would honour her with a passing nod as she entered the room—the most infinitesimal thing in nods—and another as she left; but in the interval between entering and leaving the room the lovely widow appeared utterly unconscious of her existence. Lady Carminow, be it observed, was more thoroughly a peeress than if she had been born in the purple. The consciousness of her exalted rank never left her. It was for this she had suffered the slow agonies of union with a man she loathed; for this she had shrunk shuddering from the ravings of *delirium tremens*, endured the unspeakable horrors of habitual intemperance; and she was bent upon making the utmost of the privilege she had won so dearly. The once gentle and pliant Clarice had become the haughtiest of women, but as she had still the placid Montmorency temper—the constitutional amiability of the lymphatic lily-complexioned order of womankind—people managed to endure her pride of rank, and even the oppressive sense of her wealth.

Between Lady Carminow and Stella there was a silent antagonism. Neither had forgotten that day in the library when Stella had shrunk from Clarice's pitying touch as if it had been the sting of an adder. There had been no renewal of compassionate feeling on Lady Carminow's side. She was jealous of those gifts which made Stella such a valuable companion

for Lady Lashmar. She resented the girl's superior cultivation, and spoke of her sneeringly as a blue-stocking.

'She can read Greek and Latin. How very absurd! It is only a smattering, of course.'

'Old Mr. Verner tells me that she knows more than many a B.A.,' said Lady Lashmar. 'My poor foolish stepson crammed her with learning from the time she was able to read. She has been nourished upon books.'

'What a pity she cannot get a degree. I wonder you don't send her to Girton or Nuncham. She would be more in her place there than in this house.'

'She is very useful to me. I could not possibly spare her.'

'Oh, but companions can be got by the hundred. You have only to choose from a column of advertisements. There is a fresh column every morning in the *Times*. I have often looked, thinking I should like to get some one for mother; some one who would amuse her all day, and take her quite off my hands, don't you know.'

'Needy young women in want of homes may be had in shoals, I have no doubt,' answered Lady Lashmar; 'but it is not easy to get a really good reader. Stella has a sympathetic voice, and reads well. I could not do without her.'

'She is not *simpatica* with me,' said Clarice, languidly. 'I am very sensitive about my surroundings. I should not like your Stella in my room after midnight. Those great black eyes and that pale face would frighten me. I should have an idea that I was going to be murdered.'

Lady Lashmar smiled, as at the nonsense talk of a beautiful child. She was very fond of Clarice, whose loveliness gladdened her eye, and whose

intellectual inferiority was a perpetual compliment to her understanding. She was hoping great things from the coming October, which would bring Victorian and Clarice together day after day in the easy-going intercourse of a country house. Her own breaking health would be an excuse for leaving her son and the lovely widow very much to their own devices. Lady Carminow would take the place of the mistress of the house, and Lashmar would have to consult her about everything. Could he resist so much beauty and sweetness? He had been proof against those charms once: or he had shilly-shallied and had lost his chance. If he had not been proof, if it had been a case of shilly-shally only, and he had been hard hit all the time, how gladly would he seize the golden opportunity which his mother had prepared for him! It is true that he might have made opportunities for himself during the years in which Lady Carminow had been a widow. But there are men who will make no effort in these matters, who require to have fortune flung into their laps. And then Lashmar had been absorbed by politics ever since that famous speech which had helped to secure the majority that overthrew the late Cabinet.

Lord Lashmar arrived, fresh from a yachting excursion in the Hebrides, bronzed and bearded, broad shouldered, muscular, the manliest of young men, with a fresh open-air look about him, yet intellectual withal. It was a fine face, as even Stella was fain to confess to herself as she withdrew from the morning room after his lordship's arrival, leaving mother and son together.

Yes, it was a fine face, but far from a pleasant face, Stella thought. There was the haughty expression of his grandmother's old Northumbrian

race—the Fitz Rollos—who claimed to be descended in a direct line from those Norsemen who swooped like a flight of sea-birds on that bleak coast in the dim beginning of English history.

Stella had been told about those Norse robbers of the long-ago, from whom it was such unspeakable honour to be descended. Some innate taint of Radicalism made her slow to perceive the glory of such lineage; but she thought to-day that Victorian, Lord Lashmar, had just the kind of face which would have looked its best under a Norseman's helmet, or at the prow of a piratical craft, with roughened hair blown by the north sea wind, and keen eyes looking landward, ready for rapine and carnage, so soon as that light foot should strike the shore.

She could fancy him holding his own valiantly amongst the prosy old gentlemen in the House of Lords.

He gave her a distant bow as she passed him, a salutation which she acknowledged with an almost imperceptible bend of the long, slim throat, while the look in those dark eyes of hers expressed absolute dislike. She had not forgotten his parting speech in the library seven years ago; or the air with which he had flung open the door and told her to 'march.' He would tell her to march again perhaps, if she should happen to be in his way at any time. This was the first time they two had met face to face since that day.

He looked after her wonderingly till the *portière* fell behind her, and he and his mother were alone.

'Your *protégée* has improved!' he said. 'She is not half so ugly as she was seven years ago.'

'Pray don't call her my *protégée*. You know she is a legacy from poor Hubert, an incubus which his Quixotism has imposed upon me.'

'But I take it she is useful to you, or you would have sent her about her business before now. She fetches and carries for those two lazy old maids of yours—Barker and Celestine—I suppose?'

'She reads very well; that is the only way in which she is useful to me. And now, Victorian, let us talk of yourself and of the future. I hope you are going to stay here all the winter—till the House reopens!'

'Would you like me to stay?'

'Of course I would, dearest. What have I to live for but your society? Life is a blank when you are away from me.'

'That is hard, mother dear, when I have been so much away! You make me feel that I have been an undutiful son.'

'No, no! you are not to be the slave of a too exacting love. Mothers are even more tiresome than wives. It was right that you should see the world: but now that you have travelled, and have seen so much, the time has come for settling down quietly, for assuming your right position as an English nobleman. All our greatest statesmen have been men who spent their lives at home. Our people are jealous of Continental influences, and dislike Continental habits.'

'My dear mother, I am not such a caterer for popularity as to fashion my manners or my life to please the mob; but I shall be glad to spend more of my days with you now—now that I am growing middle-aged.'

He had hesitated before those concluding words; saddened by the thought that the limit of those days which his mother and he were to spend together was already marked by Fate, and seemed to him now to lie within a definite distance. There was no longer that vagueness of prospect which makes the horizon of life seem infinite. He could

not flatter himself, in the face of obvious decay, that his mother would live to the green old age of Lady Pitland, who had ruled the world of fashion at seventy, and had been a power in her own little world till she was ninety.

'That is a good hearing!' said Lady Lashmar, with a smile which altered the whole character of her face—the mother's adoring smile. 'And you will marry, I hope, very soon. No anchor like a good wife.'

'I am not in a hurry to be anchored,' answered Lashmar, laughing; 'but I have a receptive mind, and am ready to fall in love at short notice now that politics are off my mind. What have you here in the way of beauty, mother mine?'

'The Bishop of Southborough is to be here in a week or so, with his two daughters, pretty, fresh young girls, and both musical. I should not object to either as a daughter-in-law. Then there is old Lord Banbury's daughter, the Diana of Northamptonshire, a frank open-hearted girl, and a superb horsewoman. She comes with Mrs. Mulciber, an old friend of mine.'

'I am glad you haven't got Banbury himself. He is a dreadful old driveller. Lady Sophia is a good sort of girl, but she has made herself a great deal too public, and is written about in the sporting papers as if she were a jockey. I think one of them called her "Our Soph." "Our Soph's performances with the Pytchley have been creating the usual sensation," or something of that kind. I don't think you would like our Soph for a daughter-in-law.'

'Old Lord Banbury was a friend of your grandfather!'

'Was he? Then he must have been one of the few friends my grandfather was allowed to choose for

himself. Lady Pitland would never have tolerated him on her list. Well, mother; who else is coming?'

'There is Mr. Nestorius. The rest are all your own invitations.'

'Oh! my invitations are rather *ad captandum*, given on the spur of the moment. There is Mr. Ponsonby, the famous Q.C. and Conservative Member—Ponsonby who saved Mrs. Brownrigg, don't you know, in the starving case that made such a sensation seven or eight years ago. Ponsonby began life as a Rad, but is now a High Church Tory—swears by Laud, adores Pusey, and weeps when the disestablishment of the Irish Church is mentioned; attributes all our Irish troubles to that destructive measure. I wonder how he and Nestorius will get on under the same roof?'

'They have been under the same roof before,' said her ladyship.

'Yes; but that was a bigger roof, and they were not upon company manners.'

'Mr. Nestorius is always charming. Whom else have you asked?'

'Captain Vavasour, the society novelist, and his wife; such a delightful little woman, airy, fascinating, eccentric, audacious—just like one of her husband's novels. I think she must sit to him for all his heroines!'

'Perhaps she writes his books?'

'Not she! Aurelia is one of those delicious creatures who never do anything for themselves; not so much as to fill in a card of invitation, or run up to the nursery to look at a sick baby. Vavasour writes all her letters and fills in all her cards, and she sends her maid to ask after her babies. She would not be half so graceful and charming if she were not the quintessence of selfishness. I once heard a woman ask her what her gown cost.

"Haven't the least idea!" she answered sweetly. "I never ask what things are going to cost lest I should be afraid to order them."'

'Then your Vavasours are in debt, I conclude?'

'Enormously.'

'I feel sure that I shall loathe this person.'

'I doubt it. But please don't show your aversion in any case. Don't freeze the poor little thing with the pride of the Fitz Rollos. That would be to break a butterfly upon a wheel.'

'I don't suppose she would care. A woman of that kind is always case-hardened. Did I tell you that Lady Carminow will be here for a week or two? She wanted to run in and out as she used when she was a girl, but I have insisted upon her sending over her trunks. She will help to amuse Mr. Nestorius.'

'No doubt. Mr. Nestorius is impressionable, and a widower. Lady Carminow would make him a capital wife.'

'My dear Lashmar, he is old enough to be her father.'

'Greatness is of no age. Nestorius at fifty is more attractive than the common herd of young men; and for a woman of Lady Carminow's ambitious temper he would be especially attractive. She has secured her coronet. She has made herself a marchioness, and no one can unmake her. The next step would be to secure an ex-prime minister for her husband and slave.'

'That is all nonsense. Clarice is full of romance.'

'Her marriage with a notorious sot would imply as much.'

'It was a noble feeling which prompted that unhappy union. She wanted to reclaim him.'

'She wanted to be Lady Carminow. Don't

look so unhappy, mother. I like your favourite well enough. I once almost thought myself in love with her, but that was when I was young and foolish.'

'You need not be afraid of her fascinations now,' said Lady Lashmar, piqued at his manifest indifference. 'Clarice is much too well off as a widow to wish to change her condition.'

'Precisely. She is one of those sensible women who can estimate the value of everything. She knew the value of a marquis's coronet: so much for the strawberry-leaves, so much for the pearls. She knows the exact value of her position as Lord Carminow's childless widow. It is not very much, bar the title. Take my word for it, mother, she would marry again—to better herself.'

Lady Lashmar did not argue the point. She was bent upon masking her batteries, if possible. Men are such kittle cattle; and if Lashmar once took it into his head that she was bent on match-making he would set his face against Clarice and all her charms. She would trust to the chapter of accidents, and to Lady Carminow's beauty, which was in its zenith.

That beauty came almost as a surprise on Lashmar by-and-by, when Clarice sauntered into the library at afternoon tea-time. He was unprepared for so much loveliness, albeit he had talked with her last June for five minutes on the stairs at the Foreign Office. That girlish loveliness, *svelte*, flowing, alabaster fair, had expanded into a royal beauty. Lady Carminow was much less slim than she had been in her girlhood, but her stoutness—if it must be called by so vulgar a word—was a Juno-like stoutness, and her loveliness was enhanced by expansion. The alabaster tint was still more dazzling, it had that transparent

brilliancy which Horace sings of. Her golden-auburn hair was piled in a coronet above the low classic brow. The turn of the neck was statuesque in its perfection, the carriage of the small head was full of unaffected dignity. The plainly made gown of lustreless brown silk set off the gracious figure with a noble simplicity. The lovely wrist and hand looked all the lovelier under a severely cut sleeve with a narrow cuff of old Mechlin lace.

'How strange that we should meet for the first time in this room,' said Clarice, when she and Lashmar had shaken hands, and she had ensconced herself in the most comfortable of all the comfortable chairs which were grouped about the hearth and tea-table. 'Do you remember that afternoon when you showed me the wonderful books, and when we found that poor little savage sitting on a ladder?'

'Indeed, I have not forgotten. I was reminded of the fact this morning by the sight of my brother's *protégée*. My mother tells me she has become a bidable young person, and very useful to her as a reader.'

Clarice shrugged her shoulders, and gave a faint shiver.

'I should not like such a person about *me*,' she said; 'but dear Lady Lashmar seems quite taken with her of late.'

Dear Lady Lashmar disavowed any such friendly a feeling for the girl. 'She is useful to me,' she explained; 'I require some one to read to me, and she reads well. That is all.'

'I am always afraid of self-educated people,' said Clarice, 'they are so arrogant, and so ambitious; almost always Radicals, thinking, poor creatures, that book learning is the only thing that counts, and forgetting their hopeless ignorance of everything *we* know.'

'And that naturally means everything worth knowing,' said Lashmar, smiling at her across his teacup.

'Well, you will acknowledge that in society manners and *savoir-faire* are of much more importance than Latin and Greek,' said Clarice, with conviction.

'I see you are one of those people who think that the classics are the exclusive property of half a dozen elderly gentlemen in the universities, who seldom wash, and who could hardly muster a hair brush among them,' replied his lordship laughingly.

Lashmar sipped his tea, and enjoyed the restfulness of this lazy afternoon hour, when dressing for dinner seems too far off to be thought of as a burden. He had been the first to arrive; his guests were expected by a later train; so he and his mother and Lady Carminow had this delicious interval all to themselves.

It was a new thing for him to take tea in that grandiose old library, with its bossed ceiling, rich in gold and vermilion, seeming to repeat the colour of the Grolier bindings. Hitherto the room in which Hubert, Lord Lashmar, had lived his pensive unoffending life had been a sealed chamber, dedicated to the memory of the dead, as it were a tomb in the mansion of the living. But within a week of her son's return Lady Lashmar had made up her mind to re-open the library as a general sitting-room—a pleasant place for afternoon tea—a haven in the evening for elderly people who love quiet, or for those unmusical souls who care not for the modern sonata or the modern ballad. It was Clarice who had talked Lady Lashmar into this innovation.

'The library is quite the handsomest room in the Castle, and you leave it, figuratively speaking, to bats and owls,' she said. 'What is the good of fine rooms

if one does not use them? The Lashmar library is the one great feature of this house, and you don't even let people see it.'

Lady Lashmar yielded; and it was Lady Carminow who with her own fair hands, and the aid of half a dozen housemaids, rearranged the room after the luxurious modern idea. She introduced delicious little Alma Tadema-cum-Queen Anne chairs and tables, things half Pompeian, half old English. She made delightful corners with old Indian screens, seven-leaved, golden, beautiful; and she set groups of palms in richest red pottery vases. She knew exactly where all the prettiest things were to be had, and what to order. The Genie of the Lamp was hardly more expeditious in the art of furnishing.

Lashmar was delighted.

'What a sensible idea to use this big old room for living in,' said Lashmar, lolling back in a nest of tawny plush, and looking round at the black and gold screens and vermilion tables and palms and peacock's feathers.

'It was Lady Carminow's idea. You have her to thank for the change.'

'Then I do thank her, most cordially.'

'Oh, but it is I who ought to be thankful,' cried Clarice. 'I delight in arranging a room. I am almost as officious as Lady Hillborough, who cannot be half an hour in anyone's drawing room without re-arranging all the chairs. Now, Oriana has a genius for chairs; but if I have any talent it is for corners. How do you like that corner with the seven-leaved screen and the palms?'

'It is simply perfection; a haven in which to dream away wintry days, too blissful to regret the summer; a nook for a flirtation, for a proposal even. Young ladies on their promotion ought to be very grateful to you, Lady Carminow.'

'I am very fond of nice girls,' murmured Clarice, with an air of matronly superiority worthy of a grandmother.

Afternoon tea lasted a long time upon this particular occasion. It was dusk when the two ladies closed their work-baskets and went off to their own apartments, Lady Lashmar to secure an hour's rest before she put on velvet and diamonds to receive her son's guests, who were all to arrive in time for dinner; Clarice to waste an hour pleasantly over Ohnet or Daudet, or the milder Gréville.

A few minutes before seven there came a great clanging of doors, and the corridors echoed with strange voices, whereby Lady Lashmar, resting her wearied nerves as best she might, knew that the people had all come. She could not help listening for Mr. Nestorius's voice amidst that Babel of mistresses and maids; and she heard a few words uttered calmly by that mellifluous organ. Depth and smoothness were the chief characteristics of the ex-minister's voice. Soft, grave, and yet strong were those tones which had ruled in the senate, which had touched the hearts of women. Perhaps it was this voice which had been the most powerful influence in Mr. Nestorius's career. He had that fine flow of language and those ever-musical tones which enable a man to talk nonsense unchallenged, nay, rather to make nonsense appear logic, or wit, as the orator chose.

How reposeful, how soothing sounded that voice amidst the chatter of the women and the haw-hawing of the men. Captain Vavasour was making as much fuss as the noisiest of women, but then, as he had to look after his wife's luggage and his wife's poodle, as well as his own portmanteau, there was some excuse for him.

'I wonder how I shall get on with these people,'

thought the dowager; 'they are horribly noisy, and their voices have a vulgar twang. Thank heaven there is Clarice to take them off my hands.'

At ten minutes to eight she was in the drawing-room, and the strangers were being duly presented to her, as she sat supported on one side by Mrs. Mulciber, a spreading woman in a gray satin gown, and by Lady Sophia Freemantle on the other.

Lady Sophia was a tall, well-made young woman, with the square shoulders which were considered intolerable thirty years ago, but which are permitted and even approved nowadays. She was not handsome; she would have scorned to be so. She had a healthy, brunette complexion which had been buffeted by all the winds of heaven, and shone on by the sun, until it had acquired a permanent bronze and a harder consistency than belongs to the cheek of beauty. She had regular features, a small, sharp nose, and a determined mouth and chin; a mouth that had grown resolute in encounters with obstinate horses, refusing the same ditch thirty times on end, to be beaten by Lady Sophia at the thirty-first. She had a loud voice that had grown strong in conversations carried on in the open air, and often at longish distances—with labouring men at the further side of a field, and sometimes with tramps and wayfarers just within hail; discussions as to which way the hunted fox had gone; or as to whether an animal lately seen was or was not the hunted fox. There is always a chance of being deluded by that social impostor—the fox out for a quiet airing, and only distinguishable from the real hero by his smug respectable aspect and clean brush.

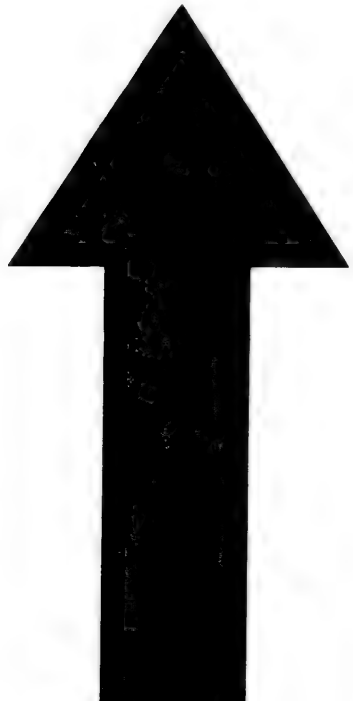
On horseback Lady Sophia looked better than one woman in twenty, not only for her willowy waist or the fit of her habit, but for the admirable pose of that slim, tall figure, and the perfect adjust-

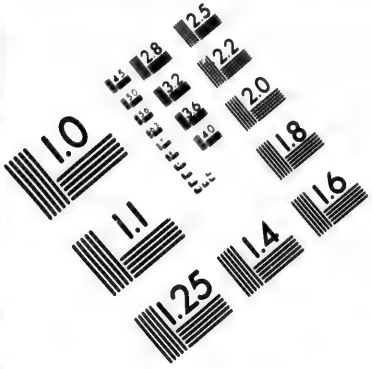
ment of the rider to every movement of the horse. In an evening gown Sophia looked her worst, and she regarded the whole question of evening gowns with supreme indifference. Her dark red satin was at least three seasons old, as Lady Carminow's keen eye perceived in an instant, and the colour was much too near the carnation of the wearer's cheek to be becoming.

Lady Carminow was at the other end of the drawing-room, half buried in a gigantic chair, and slowly fanning herself with a great ostrich feather fan, while she listened to Mr. Nestorius. She was looking divinely lovely. Her large, fair bust and shoulders looked dazzling in their Parian whiteness against the hedge-sparrow velvet of her gown. Hedge-sparrow had been the fashionable colour of last season. Women had lived and moved and had their being only in hedge-sparrow gowns. The colour was that of a hedge-sparrow's egg, be it understood, not of the sparrow himself, a turquoise blue with just the faintest greenish tint, a colour which became blondes to perfection; and as most women are blondes nowadays, or make themselves so, the hue had enjoyed a tremendous vogue.

If there was a particularly attractive woman in a room it generally happened that Mr. Nestorius and she were together. He was said to be a magnetic man, and it was an attribute of his magnetism always to draw the nicest women about him. Pallid faces and thrilling tones have an almost irresistible charm for women. Your healthy-looking man, with a florid complexion or a harsh voice, has hardly any chance.

It was within two minutes of the hour, and Lady Lashmar was beginning to look angry, when Mrs. Vavasour came gliding in, clad in a dragging garment of limp lace and muslin, which might or





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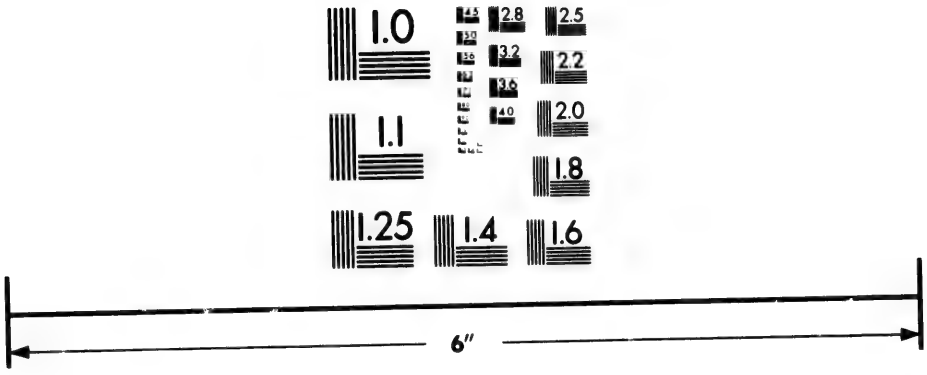

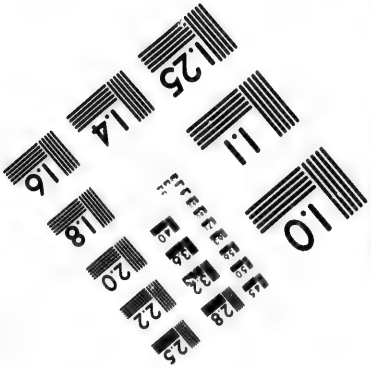

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might not be a gown. There was that marked disproportion between the lady and her clothes which is so often seen nowadays as to be no longer surprising. The lady was so exuberant, and the gown so exiguous, that had it not been for an immense garland of Maréchal Niel roses, which made a kind of flower-bed across the ample bust, Lady Lashmar would have been inclined to order the new-comer out of the room.

As it was she acknowledged her son's introduction somewhat stiffly, gave Mrs. Vavasour the tips of her fingers, and only recognised the lady's husband with a haughty inclination of her head: for it was her ladyship's opinion that when a married woman made a spectacle of herself, the husband was more to blame than the wife.

In those circles in which Mrs. Vavasour moved it had been often said that she was utterly charming: but that a stranger required half an hour to get accustomed to her.

She was certainly pretty; but that her beauty was either made or marred by art was indisputable. The cloud of golden fluffiness which surrounded her head, seeming almost too ethereal for actual hair, the definite line of dark eyebrows, and the lashes clogged with ebon dye, the porcelain whiteness and the rose-leaf bloom were all from the same source; and a child of four years old could scarcely have been innocent enough to mistake the picture for reality. But the general effect was considered good, and, as Mrs. Vavasour's reputation had never been clouded by the breath of scandal, the lady was caressed and courted, and her little ways were considered charming.

Her manner was quite as artificial as her complexion. She drawled out her delight at making Lady Lashmar's acquaintance in the latest slang, and

with the latest abbreviations; Lady Sophia contemplating her calmly with her hawk's eyes all the time, as if she had been some new specimen in that animal world of rats, weasels, stoats, ferrets, polecats, and other unclean vermin which Lord Banbury's daughter knew so intimately.

Mr. Nestorius was, of course, entitled to the arm of his hostess, and Lady Carminow to that of her host; Mr. Ponsonby, the barrister, took Mrs. Vavasour, and good-natured Mrs. Mulciber put up with the Rector, who had been asked, as it were, to open the shooting season with a good old Anglican grace short and unintelligible. Captain Vavasour took in Lady Sophia. They had travelled by the same train, and were as friendly as if they had been brought up in the nursery together, Sophia's experience of the hunting-field having given her all the ways of jolly good fellowship; but this familiarity with the fashionable novelist did not prevent her almost ignoring his wife.

'I am afraid Mrs. Vavasour and I can't have much in common,' she said, ducking to get a glimpse of that radiant lady athwart a grove of silver trophies, in the way of racing cups and candelabra. 'She doesn't look as if she hunted,' inwardly adding, 'not an outdoor make-up.'

'And you do nothing else, I have heard,' replied the Captain. 'Well, it is the highest kind of fame to do one thing to perfection.'

'I write a little in my humble way, but it is always about hunting,' said Lady Sophia.

'Then you *are* "Spur-box," of the "Sunday Swash-buckler,"' cried Vavasour; 'I have often been told as much.'

'Yes, I am "Spur-box,"' admitted the lady, looking modestly downward, overcome by the thought of her own fame. 'I rather enjoy writing for the

paper. The editor pays me very well; and there is only one thing I don't altogether like. He insists that I should always pretend to be tipsy when I am writing, or to have been horribly tipsy over night.'

'Oh! but that is *de rigueur*. It is part of the policy of the paper. All the contributors are supposed to exist in a state of chronic drunkenness. I need not tell you that they are some of the soberest men in London, as temperate as you, Lady Sophia!'

'It is rather good fun, pretending to be hopelessly obfuscated.'

'What is supposed to be your particular vanity?'

'Soda and curaçoa. I consume gallons. I am always talking of my little failings. Sometimes I go in for green chartreuse, with fatal results. But the editor wants me to drop liqueurs, which, he says, have a snobbish tone that offends his Radical subscribers. He wants me to take to dog's-nose. What is dog's-nose?'

'A compound of beer and gin, particularly affected by cabmen. What is supposed to be your social status, as Spur-box?'

'Oh! it is awfully vague. I am as misty as a mythological personage. I write from all the great hunting centres. Sometimes I am at the George at Grantham, where I seem to live in the bar; for the editor will put in remarks of his own about drinks, don't you know, and I hardly know my own writing when I see it in print.'

'I comprehend. He embellishes. That is hardly fair!'

'I have told him so, but he says that there must be a single mind directing the whole——'

'Just so! as, according to poor old Anchises when his son interviewed him in the under-world,

there was at one time a single soul permeating the human race—'

'Anchises must be dead!' said Sophia, who only caught the classic and familiar name. 'He won the Derby when I was a little tot. I remember seeing the race from my father's drag. It was the year Facile Princeps was favourite, and came in a bad third. Anchises was a mealy chestnut.'

The conversation went on at this rate all through dinner. Captain Vavasour hunted, and was fond of racing; was hand in glove with men who kept racers, and had a good deal to say about the turf. He knew old Lord Banbury's history by heart; knew what to say, and what to avoid saying. Lady Sophia did not usually like writing men. She thought them conceited and uninteresting; but the novelist charmed her. He was in the middle of a capital story about Jack Russell and the Exmoor staghounds when Lady Carminow rose swan-like at the beck of her hostess.

'What a bore!' exclaimed Sophia. 'I shall have to go with the lady-pack'

And with the lady-pack the fair Sophia departed, wondering whether she would find anyone sociable enough to join her with a cigarette. She carried her cigarette case in her pocket, even when she was dressed for the evening; and, in those pleasant houses where ladies were tolerated in the billiard-room, she always smoked. This was her first visit to Lashmar, and Mrs. Mulciber had warned her that it was a severe house.

Lady Carminow settled herself in a comfortable arm-chair near Lady Lashmar's particular corner, beside the wide old hearth. These two talked apart and left the other three ladies to their own devices. Sophia found the last *Saturday Review* with a sporting article, and retired behind that paper.

Mrs. Vavasour shed her artificial radiance upon friendly Mrs. Mulciber, whom she entertained with her opinions upon the plays and operas of last season, a style of conversation which could not have warmly interested a lady who had not seen one of them.

But Mrs. Mulciber was one of those admirable women who always appear to be interested, even when they are inwardly sinking with weariness. She was a delightful listener, had very little to say herself, but said that little in a neat and pleasant manner. She had made her way in the world without advantages of birth or fortune, and with very moderate abilities. Born and bred in the middle classes, the daughter of a village vicar, she had contrived to live all her life in the very best circles, staying now at one country house, now at another; now chaperoning an orphan heiress; now keeping things straight for an aristocratic household in which the mistress was a dipso-maniac; anon looking after a widower's young children, or helping in the dirty work of a county election. She was everybody's confidante and everybody's amanuensis. She wrote a magnificent hand, and she was good at accounts. She always read the newspapers, and knew everything that was going on in the world; but her travelling library consisted of only two books—a peerage and a Bible. These she knew by heart, and here her knowledge of literature ended. She had no imagination, and never read novels. Her mind required hard facts. Her notion of leisure was to sit at a window working high art designs of an angular ecclesiastical character upon brown holland, and she was admirable in this wise as the dragon of prudery in a country house full of lovers. For the rest she knew all the latest remedies and palliatives for neuralgia, low spirits, and in-

somnia, and was pleasantly officious in such cases. Her headquarters for the last three years had been Banbury Manor, where she acted as a deputy mother for Lady Sophia, whose real mother had run away with a colonel of dragoons at the mature age of nine and thirty, much to the satisfaction of old Lord Banbury, who had tyrannised over her for nineteen weary years, and was beginning to sicken of a worm which had never turned.

CHAPTER X

'MORDANTO FILLS THE TRUMP OF FAME'

It was nearly a week after the arrival of the visitors, and Stella had enjoyed more liberty during that interval than she had known since she became her ladyship's reader. She had only been called upon to write a few letters in the morning, and to read to Lady Lashmar after ten o'clock in the evening. These nightly readings generally lasted till the small hours: but Stella did not mind that. She was not a person who required much sleep; and she was about in the dewy park long before the castle breakfast time, and sometimes spent an hour with Mr. Verner before breakfast.

It was on one of these early visits that she was surprised by the entrance of a stranger, who came unannounced into the cottage parlour while she was reading Æschylus to her tutor.

The visitor was no less a person than Mr. Nestorius, who had unearthed Gabriel Verner the day after his arrival at the castle; and in whom the old man had welcomed an honoured pupil in the long-

ago days of his University career, before he threw up a fellowship at Magdalen to marry the girl of his choice. Yes, it was Mr. Nestorius who stood in the doorway smiling to hear the rugged music of the Prometheus from those girlish lips.

'So you are still at the old work, Verner!' he said, 'and with a very promising pupil. Will you present me?'

'My dear, this is Mr. Nestorius. You have heard me talk about Mr. Nestorius.'

Stella bowed, blushing deeply. It was the first time that anyone of importance had ever been presented to her. She closed her book, rose hastily, and took up the neat little black straw hat which was her invariable head gear.

'I hope I have not scared you away,' said Nestorius.

'No, sir; it is time for me to go back to the castle.'

'Nonsense, child,' said Verner, 'you told me her ladyship would not want you till eleven o'clock. Sit down, and let me tell Mr. Nestorius what a capital Grecian you are.'

'It used to be Edgar in the old days,' remonstrated the statesman, putting down his hat and seating himself at the table, covered with books and manuscripts, loose sheets of that vast work which was still in progress.

'But in those days you were an undergraduate and I was a don,' answered Gabriel Verner, shaking his gray head, which was always just a little tremulous, 'and now you are a great statesman and I am a nobody.'

'The interpreter of the Stagirite must always be renowned,' said Nestorius, laying his hand upon a pile of manuscript on the old man's desk.

He had unearthed his old tutor the day after

his arrival at Lashmar Castle, and had spent a good many odd half hours at the cottage, talking over Verner's hopes and disappointments, listening with heroic patience to complaints against publishers and the reading public, mild bewailings of fate, comforting, sustaining, as only he could. If he had been called a magnetic man, it may be that magnetism was but another name for an intensely sympathetic nature.

Stella looked at him with wondering, earnest eyes, as he sat beside the old tutor's desk. He was a man for whom life was on the wane. He had passed the flood-tide of life and fame, and strength and beauty. After some brilliant successes he had lived to hear himself called a failure; and he had retired from the political arena, ostensibly for ever. There was to be no return. He had done all that in him lay; and if he had not succeeded in all things, if some of his grandest ideas had been considered the vain dreams of an inspired lunatic, he had at least made himself an imperishable name. His fame and personality would stand out for ever in the history of English politics. And now he had retired, to enjoy well earned leisure, with all those delights of the scholarly mind which can only be tasted by him who is free of all public duties, who can afford to shut his door on the outer world, who has neither constituents nor patrons to whom he dare not deny himself.

Although he had passed the prime of manhood he was not yet even an elderly man. He was nearer fifty than sixty; his hair was still dark, albeit streaked with gray, a sable silvered. His features were large and boldly cut, yet with a refinement of line that made the face eminently classic. The eyes were gray; not large, and deeply sunk under overshadowing brows; but they were said to be the

most expressive eyes in England, terrible in wrath, almost divine in love. The mouth was large, but the lips were thin and flexible, high bred lips The clean shaved chin was massive. The hollow cheek indicated thought, and hinted at the night watches of the statesman and the student. Even to Stella, to whom his history was almost a blank, Mr. Nestorius appeared an interesting man.

'So this is Stella, the young lady of whom I heard from poor Lashmar years ago, when she was a little child.'

'You knew Lord Lashmar, sir, *my* Lord Lashmar,' exclaimed Stella breathlessly.

'Yes; he and I were great friends, though my original friendship was with her ladyship's side of the house. Poor Lashmar interested me; he was a remarkable young man.'

'He was the best and noblest man ever lived,' said Stella.

'Within your knowledge, yes. I can understand and admire your grateful affection for him,' answered Nestorius gently. 'It was at Harrogate I met him for the last time. You remember, Verner. He was there with you one autumn.'

'We only stayed a few days; the place did not suit him, and he was anxious to go back to the castle,' said Verner.

'Yes, I remember; and one of his reasons for that anxiety was the existence of an adopted daughter, a child of seven, about whom he talked to me.'

'He was too good to me,' faltered Stella.

'He has his reward, since you remember him with tears,' said Nestorius. 'Yes, he told me his scheme of education, and how receptive he had already found your young mind, what great things

he hoped from its later development; and all those hopes were cut short by his untimely death. But I am glad to see that Mr. Verner has carried on his pupil's work.'

'Mr. Verner has made my life happy,' said Stella. 'I should have been quite miserable without him.'

'Not very flattering to her ladyship,' remarked Mr. Nestorius, looking at her thoughtfully, that keen eye of his noting the black stuff gown and linen collar, the utter of absence of girlish ornament; noting too, the unnatural gravity of the small, pale face, with those wondrous star-like eyes; noting the exquisite shape of the head, and that coronal of blue-black hair.

'I am grateful for Lady Lashmar's——'

She was going to say kindness, but her self-respect revolted at a word that would have been a lie, and she ended her sentence with 'toleration.'

'And you really read Greek?' asked the statesman.

'I read it and love it.'

'No modern languages, I presume.'

'French and German, and a little Italian.'

'You are a very wonderful young person.'

'I have had nothing to live for except books. I should have been idle and worthless if I had not learnt a good deal from such a kind and patient master.'

She had her small, slender hand caressingly upon Verner's shabby coat-collar, and he looked up at her with ineffable love in his dim old eyes.

'She has been sight to the blind,' he said. 'She has been my consolation, and I have been hers, under, perhaps, not altogether generous treatment. And now her ladyship finds that the girl whom she counted as a burden is the most useful of all her dependents.'

'Yes, I have heard that you are Lady Lashmar's reader. Lady Carminow told me about you. And now if you are going back to the castle, we may as well walk together, and you can tell me a little more about yourself and your studies.'

The offer of such escort would have been an honour to a young person of much loftier rank than her ladyship's reader. Stella put on her hat without a word, waited meekly while Nestorius and Verner talked for another quarter of an hour; and then the old man followed his visitors to the gate of the little garden, with its chrysanthemums and late-lingering roses, and stood watching them as they walked down the village street, the statesman tall and erect, the girl slim and straight and tall beside him.

Lady Carminow never rose before ten o'clock, never appeared in public until luncheon. It was one of the privileges she had allowed herself since her widowhood. She left the raw early hours to commoner people.

'The days are always long enough,' she said, with her pretty languid air; 'I get all my reading over in the mornings, and then I am free to enjoy society.'

Lashmar, listening politely to this explanation, wondered what kind of reading it was which was performed in the seclusion of Lady Carminow's own apartment, inasmuch as her knowledge of books, old and new, seemed of the slightest. But when a woman is completely lovely all words which drop from her lips are as pearls and rosebuds.

'I am not such a loser as other people by your absence from the breakfast table,'

he said, 'for I am always off early with the shooters; but Mr. Nestorius has a right to complain. He finds the castle breakfast very dull, with only Mrs. Mulciber to pour out his tea. The bishop's two musical daughters breakfast earlier, and are off to the music-room for their morning practice before anybody else appears.'

'Indeed, and I suppose Lady Sophia is with the shooters?'

'When she has no hunting.'

'And Mrs. Vavasour comes down about the same time as I do; we generally meet on the stairs.'

'Mrs. Vavasour has a good deal to do of a morning,' said Lashmar; 'I don't think all her morning hours are given to reading. A complexion like hers must be a work of time. I take it that each eyebrow must require a quarter of an hour, to say nothing of failures.'

'Poor thing,' sighed Clarice, 'I always feel so sorry for her.'

'A waste of compassion. She is not at all sorry herself.'

'But to be a spectacle like that, and to have people making jokes about one.'

'People must make jokes about something; and better that they should make fun of Mrs. Vavasour's complexion than of her character. *That*, I am told, is faultless.'

'Except that she is intolerably selfish, I believe she is really a very nice person,' agreed Lady Carminow.

'Mr. Nestorius made the walk to the castle last as long as he possibly could. He professed himself enchanted with that pastoral landscape,

with its calm Middleshire beauty, seen in the rich colouring and under the sombre skies of autumn. He was interested in the river, and made Stella show him the late Lord Lashmar's boat-house, and the little creek that he had been so fond of, the rushy retreats where he and his adopted daughter had spent many a summer day. It was half-past ten when they arrived at the castle, and Stella ran off to her room to wash her hands and re-arrange her hair before she went to her ladyship.

The statesman was keenly interested in this poor dependent, and took occasion to talk about her at afternoon tea in the library, where the shooters were allowed to enjoy themselves in their muddy boots, and were refreshed with strong tea and cheered with pleasant talk before they went off to dress for dinner. Afternoon tea was much the pleasantest meal of the day at this particular season, when it was just light enough to dispense with lamps and just cold enough to enjoy a wood fire. Lady Carminow, secure in the consciousness of sound daylight beauty, lounged gracefully in an oriental tea-gown ; while Lady Sophia, who knew that a habit was the one costume which really suited her, balanced herself on the toes and heels of her neat little boots before the fire-place, and honoured the company with one of those graphic descriptions of a run which are so intensely interesting to the narrator and such an intolerable bore to the audience.

Mrs. Vavasour, who never sat on a chair when she could find an excuse for graceful sprawling, was reclining on the hearth-rug caressing her poodle, while the bishop's daughters, who

disapproved of the lady but admired the poodle, showed their experience of society by their polite attentions to the dog and their cool avoidance of its owner. Mrs. Mulciber, looking like the Goddess of Plenty in a tailor gown, presided at a tea-table richly furnished with every variety of muffin and bun.

It was one of Lady Lashmar's bad days, and she was not to appear until dinner time.

'I have had a long talk with your poor brother's *protégée*,' said Mr. Nestorius, luxuriously seated at Lady Carminow's elbow, and enjoying his second cup of tea. 'She is the most extraordinary girl I ever met.'

'As how?' asked Lashmar coldly.

'She is not twenty, and she has read more than most women of fifty. She knows half a dozen languages, and has an intense appreciation of classic literature: and yet she has all a girl's humility, and a perfect unconsciousness that she is gifted above the rest of her sex.'

'But do you call it gifted to be able to take in half a dozen grammars and dictionaries?' asked Lady Carminow contemptuously. 'The wretched girl has been crammed by old Mr. Verner, an eccentric of the ..rest water——'

'A remarkably fine scholar,' interrupted Nestorius.

'And, I daresay, like one of those certificated schoolmistresses one reads of in the papers, the poor thing will go off her head some fine morning from too much learning.'

'I beg your pardon, Lady Carminow, this girl has not been crammed. She has learnt all she knows for the love of learning. Books have been her only companions in this house, Mr. Verner

her only friend out of it. She has absorbed the fruits of his long years of study, she has profited by poor Lashmar's training, and by Verner's multifarious reading.'

'In a word, she is a blue-stocking of the first water. You don't mean to say, Mr. Nestorius, that you, who are so manly a man, can admire the unwomanly in woman.'

'There is nothing unwomanly in Miss—Miss—by-the-by I did not hear her surname this morning. She was only introduced to me as Stella.'

'Her father's name was Boldwood,' answered Lashmar, 'but she has been called here by no other name than Stella. Her father was a blatant Radical, who preached socialistic and atheistic opinions to the operatives of Brumm. No influence so baneful for the uneducated classes as that of an educated man who has gone wrong.'

'Boldwood, a Freethinker and a Radical!' exclaimed Nestorius. 'Upon my word, I believe the man must have been a fellow I knew at Oxford, a Balliol man, one Jonathan Boldwood.'

'Jonathan, was his name. Poor old Lash had an idea that he had seen him in the Oxford eight.'

'Nothing more likely. Boldwood was a great athlete, and a very clever fellow into the bargain. It was thought that he would take high honours at Balliol. But there was a screw loose somewhere. He turned Radical, and wasted his time at the Union, where he was famous as a grand speaker. He read Kant and Hegel when he ought to have been reading for his degree; and the end was failure. He published a pamphlet, which sneered at the

University as an institution and libelled the dons. The rest is silence. He was not absolutely sent down, but he was one of the most unpopular men in the College, and one fine morning he disappeared altogether, leaving his books and baggage and a sheaf of tradesmen's bills on his table. He was heard of three years afterwards travelling in Spain, a student of Romany and the companion of gipsies, following in the footsteps of Borrow, without the Bible. I never heard of him afterwards.'

'His last incarnation was as a working engineer in Brumm,' said Lashmar. 'It was always supposed there that he had married a gipsy; but I had imagined the common type of English race-course Romany, not the more romantic Gitana. That idea of a Spanish alliance would account for Stella's dark eyes and blue-black hair.'

'She is a most interesting girl,' murmured Nestorius, with a dreamy air.

Lady Carminow felt offended. She had no ulterior views about Mr. Nestorius, but she would have liked him to languish under the spell of her fatal beauty; at least, so long as they two were staying under one roof. Wherever she was it behoved her to be first. She had a particular dislike to learned women, and hated to hear a woman admired on account of mental graces; perhaps from an underlying consciousness that her own mind was the poorest thing about her.

'I must know more of this very interesting girl!' exclaimed Mrs. Mulciber, in her round comfortable voice. 'Why cannot we have her to tea of an afternoon?'

Mrs. Mulciber wished to stand well with Mr. Nestorius; firstly, because he was a great man in the abstract, and it would be pleasant to be able

to describe him as her particular friend; and secondly, because she did not believe that his retirement from public life would be eternal. The day might come when the student would again be prime minister, and then it would be well to have gratified the great man's little whims, and to be remembered as a pleasant, serviceable person.

'Why not indeed!' exclaimed Mrs. Vavasour. 'It would be capital fun. She would be copy for Vav. He could put her into one of his books.'

Vav—pet name of his wife's—looked daggers. He hated to have his books talked about; most of all to have them talked about by Mrs. Vavasour, who never read them, and who had the credit of writing them. That suggestion that everything in life was to be 'copy' for him; that he had no ideas of his own, but must go about the world character-stalking, was positively maddening.

'I never put actual people in my books,' he said.

'Quite true,' muttered Nestorius, aside to Lady Carminow, 'his characters are anything but actual people.'

'It would not be at all right to have the girl here as a kind of laughing-stock,' said Clarice, with a magnanimous air, as if she were defending the absent.

'Not by any means as a laughing-stock, only as something fresh and bright and original,' argued Mrs. Mulciber.

'But she is only a kind of servant,' urged Clarice. 'It would be cruel to unsettle her mind.'

'I think her mind is too well furnished to

be unsettled by a cup of afternoon tea,' said Nestorius; 'a kind of servant who knows half a dozen languages is not likely to remain long a servant. Rely upon it that girl will strike out some career for herself before she is much older. She has been in bondage hitherto, but she has made good use of her bondage.'

Mrs. Mulciber pounced upon Stella in the corridor on the following afternoon, introduced herself with affectionate familiarity, and wanted to take the girl to the library. 'We all want you to come to tea,' she said. 'Mr. Nestorius has been telling us how clever and how nice you are.'

To her surprise Stella flatly refused.

'I used almost to live in that room when I was a child,' she said. 'It is there I most vividly remember Lord Lashmar—*my* Lord Lashmar. His ghost haunts the room I could not bear to hear talk and laughter, and to see strange faces there.'

'You are a very foolish girl,' said Mrs. Mulciber, with her kindly common-sense tone. 'Your life must be hideously dull, a positive slavery, the hard work without the privileges of an upper servant; and here is an opportunity for improving your position, and getting your superiority recognised by the very best people.'

'I don't care for the best people,' the girl answered bluntly. 'They are nothing to me. I would rather be with Mr. Verner than with the finest of Lady Lashmar's friends.'

'You forget that Mr. Nestorius is among those very people. To know such a man is a liberal education.'

'Mr. Nestorius is very clever, and very

kind—but I would rather see him at Mr. Verner's cottage than among the fine people downstairs.'

'You are incorrigible,' exclaimed Mrs. Mulciber. 'Your only chance of ever getting on in the world is knowing smart people.'

'Then I shall never get on, for I hate smart people.'

As she spoke there was a vision in her mind of a long-vanished day. She recalled that afternoon in the library—the girlish graceful figure clad in tawny silk and scarlet sash; the bright beaming face turned to her, the pitying hand from which she had shrunk as from something unclean; and her own image in a black frock, skimpily made, common. She had keenly felt the sting of her own unbeauteousness as contrasted with that radiant vision. She would have felt it even if Lord Lashmar had not denounced her as ugly and ill-mannered. She had been both—she was both even yet perhaps, although she had been able to get on so well with Mr. Nestorius. These mighty souls are indulgent to ugliness and bad manners. Did not Plato and all the best men in Athens put up with Socrates?

So did she argue with herself, and nothing would induce her to accept Mrs. Mulciber's invitation.

'She is what our neighbours call *farouche*,' said that worthy woman, when she announced her failure. 'She is very much at home with Homer and Virgil, but she is afraid of us.'

Nothing more was said about Stella. Captain Vavasour had kindly consented to read a short story which he had just written for Harper, a story of the upper currents, and to listen and to criticise absorbed everybody's attention. Tea, muffins, short-

bread, sentiment, Buddhism, pleasantly occupied the afternoon hour.

In the evening, the Vavasours started games: dumb crambo, charades, clumps, the usual kind of thing. Mr. Nestorius excelled at dumb crambo. It was an attribute of his all-roundism. The *vielseitig* man must stoop from Greek to games, from the fate of nations to hunt-the-slipper.

Lashmar detested this kind of fooling, so he went off to the library and plunged into the thrilling pages of Hansard. He was interested in a factory bill that was to come on next session, the everlasting question of right and wrong between employers and employed, and he wanted to make himself master of the subject. It behoved him, as one having much property in Brumm, to be a friend of the operative, albeit setting his face steadily against all innovations that smacked of socialism.

He had begun to read after ten o'clock, and he read on till after twelve, by which time the house-party had finished their games and retired for the night, Mr. Nestorius yawning tremendously directly he escaped from that appreciative circle of which he had been the life. Deep in the report of a case of trade-union tyranny, which had gone almost as far as murder and quite as far as arson, Lashmar was unconscious of the opening of a door near him, and only looked up from his book when he felt a sudden brightening of the light in front of him.

It was his mother's slave, standing there in her black gown, with a candle in her hand.

'I came to look for a book for her ladyship. I did not know you were here, my lord,' she faltered, startled at finding any one in a room she had expected to find empty.

'Can I help you? What book is it?'

'Sir Thomas Mallory. The Mort d'Arthur.'

'Why, that is the very book——,' began Lashmar, and then stopped abruptly, with a smile, looking at the pale grave face in front of him, which gave no answering smile. It was the very book she had been reading seven years ago, perched on the ladder yonder at the other end of the room. Involuntarily he glanced towards the spot, shrouded in deepest shadow.

'There is another copy,' she said; 'I know where to find it.'

She went to a shelf a little way off, and selected a small octavo.

'I have been reading the "Idyls of the King" to her ladyship, and she wishes to hear the story of Launcelot and Elaine in the old romance,' she explained.

'It used to be a favourite story of yours when you were a child, I think,' said Lashmar.

He had been looking at her deliberately while she found her book and moved quietly towards the door, looking at her with the thought of what Mr. Nestorius had said about her in his mind.

One thing was certain. The ugly child—if ugly she had ever been — had grown into a very interesting woman. He did not know whether to call her beautiful. The small features were delicately moulded, but they had not the statuesque beauty of Lady Carminow's outline. The little nose inclined to the *retroussé*, the lips were too thin for loveliness—lips of Minerva rather than of Venus—lips of Sibyl or mystic rather than of lovable woman. The complexion was a pale olive, that tint which suggests bronze rather than marble. The hair was blue-black, lustrous, heavy. The eyes were the most glorious orbs that Lashmar ever

remembered to have looked upon; eyes full of thought and full of pride; eyes of a queen, and of a queen who would rule her kingdom.

He looked at her gown, the black merino gown, with its plain straight skirt and demi-train; just such a gown as every housemaid at Lashmar wore of an afternoon. His mother had not been over-indulgent to her dead step-son's *protégée*.

He opened the door for her.

'Do you know that it is past twelve o'clock?' he said. 'I suppose your duties are over for to-night?'

'No! I shall be reading for some hours, perhaps. Her ladyship is such a bad sleeper.'

'Rather hard upon you!'

'Not at all. I am fond of reading, and I am always interested in the books her ladyship chooses.'

She was leaving him with only a slight bend of the graceful head.

'Good-night!' he said.

'Good-night, my lord.'

She was gone, and he stood riveted where she had left him.

'So that is the tawny-visaged brat, with the goblin eyes, that my poor brother brought into the Castle in his arms that midsummer night nearly fifteen years ago,' he said to himself. 'Poor old Lash! how proud he would have been of his bantling if he had lived to see her as she is to-night. A girl who warms an ex-prime minister to enthusiasm; a girl who, for distinguished looks and pride of mien, could hold her own in any *cotérie* in London, Paris, or Vienna. And she has grown up to *this* under my mother's stringent rule.'

And then going back to Hansard, and finding it impossible to revive his interest in trade-unionism and Mary Anne, he said to himself:

'She looks as if she had a temper—just the same kind of temper that made her flout Clarice, seven years ago, in this very room. She looks as if she had nerves. Why doesn't my mother let her go out into the world? It is like chaining an eagle to keep her here.'

He heard voices—a grave baritone—a subdued contralto—on the terrace, under his window, at eight o'clock next morning, and looking out saw Mr. Nestorius and Stella walking up and down, in apparently earnest conversation.

'She is as much at her ease with him as if she had been reared among Cabinet Ministers,' he said to himself. 'I hope he won't turn her head.'

Nestorius was talking to Stella of her father, a theme that thrilled her. No one until this hour had ever spoken that name since Hubert Lashmar's death, and Lord Lashmar had always been reticent upon this one subject, shrinking from all questioning.

'And you really knew him,' she exclaimed with delight, 'You were at the University with him?'

'Yes, I knew him well, and admired his gifts, which were great. He was an original genius, and in a world where all things are growing old and stale that ought to count for much. Is it many years since—since you lost him?'

Mr. Nestorius had a dim recollection of some tragical story connected with Lashmar's adoption of an orphan child, and he touched the subject apprehensively.

'He is not dead,' the girl answered eagerly, paling at the question. 'At least, I have never

heard of his death; and I always think of him and pray for him, and dream of him as living. I see his face in my dreams often, though I was such a child when he went away.'

'He went away!' repeated Mr. Nestorius wonderingly.

'Yes, very, very far away. I think he must have gone to Australia; but Lord Lashmar would never tell me much. Perhaps he thought I should think my father cruel for leaving me; but I knew him too well to think that. He must have been in trouble of some kind—great trouble—or he would not have gone without me. And then came the fire, and Lord Lashmar saved my life, and adopted me as his own little girl.'

'Did your father leave long before the fire?'

'I can't remember. All that part of my life seems like a dream. I woke one morning and saw green trees and gardens and a river. It was like waking up in fairyland. That was the beginning of my life at Lashmar. I know my father was very unhappy. The world had used him hardly, he said, and I think my mother's death must have broken his heart. He told me once that she died of a broken heart. "You are to remember that when you are a woman," he said. "Remember that your mother's heart was broken. Remember this too: Fathers have flinty hearts." I used to say the words over and over again to myself before I knew what they meant.'

'There was some history behind that!' mused Nestorius, deeply interested. 'And so you think your father went to Australia?'

'Only because Lord Lashmar said he had gone very, very far away. He would hardly have said that of America, which seems so near nowadays.'

'No! he would hardly have said as much of

America. But surely if your father were living he would have communicated with you—he would have sent some one in search of you—would have made some inquiries about you, in all these years.'

'Oh! please don't try to make me believe that he is dead,' the girl pleaded, with an agonised look. 'In all these years my only comfort has been to think of him as living; winning his way to fortune in a new country; waiting until he had made his fortune to come home to me. That has been my only day-dream. It is the only hope I have in this life. Don't spoil it for me.'

Her hands were clasped, her eyes streaming with tears. Never since Hubert's death had she spoken of her father. She forgot that Mr. Nestorius was a great man and almost a stranger to her. She bared her girlish heart to him.

'Not for worlds would I dispel a sweet delusion, dear child, even if it is but a delusion!' he answered gently. 'But you must not talk of life being empty of hope for you. At your age the future is full of glorious possibilities. Ah, if I were only as young as you and as gifted! Come now, be frank with me. You must have ambition. You do not mean always to be her ladyship's reader; to fossilize in that position.'

'No, no, indeed,' exclaimed Stella, and then, freely as she would have talked to Gabriel Verner, she told Mr. Nestorius her dream of the future; a cottage beside the Avon, with faithful Betsy for her housekeeper, friend, companion; an abundance of books, and her pen as the source of her income. All she wanted was a complacent publisher who would buy her books.

'You have an idea that you could write if you tried,' said Nestorius, knowing that the dreams of youth are for the most part only dreams.

'I have been writing ever since I was thirteen years old,' she answered gravely.

'You began with the first year of your teens. That was early. What have you written?'

'Verses first, stories in rhyme, like Scott's—I don't mean like his, for mine are not to be named beside "Marmion" or the "Minstrel"—only on that plan. I blush to remember all the nonsense I have written.'

'Did you ever show your verses to Mr. Verner?'

'Never. He is all that is good and dear, and a great scholar, but he is very matter-of-fact. He would have read my manuscript patiently from the first line to the last, and would have said: "My dear, this is not so good as Homer," or something to that effect. I shall never show my poor verses to any one, but they consoled me while I was writing them. But I have written two or three stories, which I do not think can be much worse than the worst of the novels Mudie sends her ladyship.'

'Let me see one of your stories, immediately,' said Nestorius eagerly. 'What a wonderful girl you are; and you have written for years, alone in your room, day after day.'

'Night after night,' said Stella; 'I had no time to write in the day. The night has been always my own.'

'And you began to write, and you have gone on writing without encouragement, or help, or counsel of any kind? You are a wonderful girl. Go and get me one of your books immediately.'

'Will you really be so good as to look at a few pages and to tell me frankly if it is quite intolerable rubbish?'

'I will tell you the truth in all honour; and if your story is as good as I think it must be, it

shall be published, even if I have to turn publisher and produce it myself. And that will be the first step towards independence and your cottage by the Avon,' added Nestorius, smiling down at her.

Her cheeks glowed and her eyes brightened at the idea. Except from old Gabriel Verner, she had received no such kindness since her benefactor's untimely death. She looked up at the statesman with eyes that overflowed with grateful tears, tears of joyfulness this time.

'How good you are,' she faltered; 'if you are as good to other people as you have been to me, no wonder——'

She stopped, blushing at her own boldness, suddenly remembering the gulf between them.

'No wonder what?'

'No wonder that you are the most popular man in England, in or out of office. At least,' falteringly, 'that is what Lady Lashmar said of you the other day.'

'Lady Lashmar is very kind. But I am not so interested in other people as I am in you, Stella. I may call you Stella, may I not? You were introduced to me by that name.'

'I have no other name here. My father's name is forbidden, as if it were an evil thing, because he was a Radical.'

'Stella is enough. It expresses you admirably. And now go and get me your story. The one you like best. I will read it before luncheon, and if you can meet me in the afternoon at dear old Verner's, I will tell you honestly what I think of it. Perhaps I shall have to say that you have produced no situation quite so good as Priam's supplication to Achilles for the body of Hector.'

Stella smiled, and went meekly to obey her patron. She returned in five minutes, breathless, bringing a

manuscript, which was thick enough to be formidable. But it was written very clearly in a neat and somewhat masculine hand, a penmanship modelled upon that of the late Lord Lashmar, who had been as a god to Stella. She had cherished every scrap of his writing she had trained herself to write like him.

Mr. Nestorius was not appalled by the bulk of the manuscript. He was an enthusiast in all things great and small, and took up every cause with a like earnestness.

'Your story is longer than I expected,' he said; 'I shall not have finished it by this afternoon; but I shall be able to tell you something about it.'

He went off to his dressing-room after breakfast, pretending to have letters to write, drew an arm-chair to the fire, and read Stella's manuscript.

He had not read twenty pages before he started up from his chair and began to walk up and down the room rapidly, as he always did when deeply moved. He felt like a discoverer, almost as Columbus must have felt when he found America.

'The girl is a genius,' he told himself delightedly. 'There is a power in this, there is a freshness that means genius. She inherits Boldwood's originality. His audacity too. This is a story that people will read.'

It was a story by a writer suckled at the purest founts—a writer whose fancy had never been wasted on the visions of minor seers. The girl who had read Homer and Virgil, and Dante and Goethe, and Milton and Shakespeare from her childhood, had started with advantages rarely possessed by the writing young woman. Her style had never been vitiated by evil examples, her mental eye had never been dazzled by tinsel. Her English was true and clear and vigorous. Every sentence went

home to the mark, like a well-aimed arrow to the goal. Her thoughts, when not purely original, were culled unconsciously from the noblest sources. Her plot, her characters were all her own; but she had learnt character-painting from Homer and Shakespeare, plot-weaving from those Greek dramatists who have given us all the elements of dramatic fiction; and youth, with its poetry and enthusiasm, its ardent love and uncompromising hate, glowed in every page. The story could only have been written by a young woman; and only one young woman in a thousand could have written such a story.

'The girl has a fortune in her pen,' said Mr. Nestorius, 'in an age when strong fiction is one of the necessities of life—like strong drink. Poor child! she can afford to shake the dust of Lashmar Castle from her feet as soon as she likes.'

Yet when he met Stella at Mr. Verner's cottage two or three hours later, the great man was laudably moderate.

'Your book will do, Stella,' he said. 'I shall send it to my own publisher directly I have finished reading it. There is tragedy coming, I see: the inexorable fates are dogging your heroine's steps. Why could you not give us a happy ending, like that of "Alcestis"?'

'I wrote the story as it came to me,' she said: 'I felt that when Iolanthe was so happy some evil must be coming: think how happy my life seemed when those horses ran away.'

'Ah! poor child, your life has been too full of tragedy. The comedy is all to come—fame, and fortune, and true love'—with a faint sigh. 'That vivid pen of yours may win you all good things.'

'It has consoled me when I should have been

miserable if I had been obliged to think about myself,' answered Stella. 'And do you really, really think the story is worth printing, sir?' she asked, with child-like diffidence.

'I am sure of it. Your heroine is not one of those invertebrate puppets that languish and swoon through a fashionable novel. She is a creature of flesh and blood, as much alive as you are yourself. She is sure to find friends—and enemies, which is still better; for foes talk louder than friends, and talk means fame.'

CHAPTER XI

'BUT ALL HER TIES THE STRONG INVADER BROKE'

LORD LASHMAR, having a keen and curious mind, had watched that interview between the statesman and her ladyship's reader, and had marvelled much what they had been talking about. There had been dramatic action, too, that had puzzled him. Stella's clasped hands, and face uplifted appealingly to Nestorius. What could it all mean?

He thought about it during the morning's battue, and shot other people's birds with a recklessness that drew down reproof from his guests.

'It isn't English hospitality to take a man's bird from under his nose,' said Captain Vavasour whereupon Lashmar owned that he had been woolgathering.

'You'd better wake up, old man,' suggested the barrister, 'or you may be firing at one of us next.

I've been told that I am rather like an old cock pheasant. Everybody is like something zoological, don't you know. Vavasour is like a sheep, and you have a look of an eagle, or a falcon—fierce, restless, unsatisfied.'

Mr. Nestorius came in late to afternoon tea, to find the shooters established round the fire, Lady Sophia among them, in a corderoy shooting-gown with picturesque buttons, while the other women languished in tea-gowns and took credit to themselves that they were not as that publican. Every woman is proud of her own particular line, whatever it is. The feminine woman is proud of her pretty limpness and little affectations; the masculine woman is proud of her mannishness; the ignoramus rejoices that she is not a blue-stocking; while the bookish damsel scorns her unlettered sister. Hence universal self-satisfaction. Women envy one another their gowns and their jewels, their carriages, drawing-rooms, and lovers; but every woman thinks her own personality the best. Blouzabella would hardly change faces with Mrs. Langtry.

'Pray where have you been hiding yourself all day, Mr. Nestorius?' asked Clarice, with an offended air; 'except for a brief appearance at luncheon, we have seen nothing of you.'

'Life is not all pleasure, Lady Carminow,' he answered, with an air of meaning much more than he said, that little affectation of suppressed feeling which is the most acceptable flattery to a sensible woman. 'I had letters to write, and papers to read all the morning, and I spent the afternoon with my old friend Verner.'

'Why is not Mr. Verner asked to the Castle?' exclaimed Lady Carminow, turning suddenly to Lord Lashmar. 'He is evidently the most attractive person in the neighbourhood. This is not the first

occasion on which he has deprived us of the society of Mr. Nestorius.'

'An old book-worm does not generally exercise that kind of magnetism unaided,' answered Lashmar, with a faint sneer; 'but I think to-day there was a feminine element. Mr. Nestorius has taken it into his head to be interested in my brother's *protégée*, and I believe she spends all her leisure with old Verner.'

'She was with him this afternoon,' said Nestorius. 'Yes, I am deeply interested in her. I have not been so much interested in any woman since——'

'Not since your dissolution,' interrupted Lady Carminow innocently.

There was an awkward pause, for at the time of that unexpected and fatal dissolution, it had been said that Mr. Nestorius was influenced by a feminine counsellor; and that if, as his admirers alleged, Nestorius was a prophet, there was also a prophetess—a sibyl behind the curtain, giving forth mystic breathings, words of wisdom, but always just a little too far in advance of the time.

The statesman seemed sublimely unconscious of that sudden silence.

'Yes; the girl is altogether remarkable—a creature of exceptional bringing up and of exceptional talent. Your brother's influence upon so young a child is a remarkable fact in psychology. I must have a long talk with you about this girl and her destiny, Lashmar.'

'I am quite ready to discuss that thrilling question. But I believe she is fairly provided for in this house, and as she is useful to my mother, I do not see any necessity for disturbing the *status quo*.'

This came oddly from a man who only last

night had compared Stella's condition to that of a chained eaglet.

'That is rather a selfish view of the question,' said Nestorius. 'I should be sorry to deprive Lady Lashmar of an admirable reader; but there are plenty of mediocre young women in the world who can read aloud; and I think Miss Boldwood is a genius, and ought not to waste the best years of her life in dependence and drudgery.'

'Has she been complaining to you?' asked Lashmar sharply.

'Not by one word, not by so much as a suggestion; but she has done me the honour to confide in me, as a friend of the man who has educated her. She tells me that her father is not dead—or that she has never had tidings of his death.'

'Her father is as dead as Queen Anne. He lost his life in trying to save hers, poor beggar. She was not five years old at the time, and her passionate grief for the father made such an impression upon my brother that he had not the heart to tell her the truth. He paltered with her, told her that her father had gone away to a distant country; they would meet again—yes, in years to come she would see him again. He meant in the land of shadows; she accepted the promise as gospel truth, and Lash never had the courage to undeceive her—there was so much of the woman about him, poor fellow! He warned all the servants against letting out the true story of the fire, threatened me with his lasting displeasure if I ever blurted out the truth, implored my mother to be silent: and as neither her ladyship nor I could endure the sight of his *protégée*, there was not much fear that either of us would be talking to her about her father. I don't think I saw the child half a dozen times during poor Lashmar's life. For one reason

I was seldom here, and for another his ways were not my ways. Those three innocents—my brother, old Verner, and the child—used to lead a kind of Arcadian existence, like shepherds in a Virgilian eclogue.'

'To undeceive her now would be cruel,' said Nestorius gravely. 'Her idea of her father's existence is a consoling hallucination. As she grows older and knows more of the world doubt will arise, and then sad certainty that they two can never meet more on earth. Poor Boldwood, I can see him now, rushing along Holywell in his rag of a gown. A tall, Herculean figure, a face like a Titan's, ugliness and power curiously combined. He had fine eyes, I remember, but not her eyes. They are Southern.'

'The legacy of the Gitana, no doubt. By-the-by I found something among my brother's hoards that may interest you—Boldwood's relics—only a miniature and some charred papers utterly unreadable.'

'Who knows whether we might not get them read: experts contrive to decipher even a charred manuscript nowadays. I should like to examine Boldwood's relics.'

'You can do so whenever you like. Such a philanthropic curiosity ought to be satisfied,' answered Lashmar smilingly.

He made believe to laugh at the statesman's kindly enthusiasm; but he was not the less angry. Had not he and his mother set their faces from the very outset against this waif of Brumm gutters, this spawn of Radicalism; and, lo, she was perked up before them as the offspring of a Balliol undergraduate, a man of good family and gentle breeding; a fallen angel, but certainly angelic; one of that starry host which Burke registers and society agrees to consider worthy. Such an one may fall very low, may labour among journeymen, may cast in his lot

with rebels and socialists, but there is always something of the original blue blood, a narrow streak of the divine ichor which distinguishes the gently born. One can forgive so much in a man whose ancestors were worthy.

Lashmar was deeply wroth with the statesman. It seemed to him as if Mr. Nestorius had only come to the Castle to reverse the existing order of things, to bring the sediment to the surface.

'He is the same everywhere and in everything,' he said to himself. 'He sweeps away all the old land marks. He cannot spend a week in a country house without hatching a revolution.'

Not a word did Nestorius say of Stella's authorship. He had promised her that her literary attempts should remain a secret between those two alone—the publisher was to know nothing of his author's personality. The reading world was to get neither real name nor *nom de plume*. The book was to be issued anonymously. It would tell its own story.

Mr. Nestorius deserted the drawing-room that evening, withdrew quietly while Lady Carminow was playing Schumann, and lulling every one to a delicious repose, after an admirable dinner, a dreamy languor broken by low murmurs of conversation. It was not that the statesman was indifferent to Schumann, exquisitely played. Music was one of the facets of his many-sided mind. But to-night he had another and keener interest. He went straight to the library, where he found Lashmar, still toiling at Hansard.

'Are you reading up the factory question?' he asked lightly; 'that's a pity. Your full man never tells in debate. Just get an inkling of your subject, my dear fellow, and flash out a few stray facts, at random, like the rays of a bull's-eye-

lantern. You know what you want, and what your factory people ought to want. Don't ruin your case with statistics and hard facts. Touch and go, man, touch and go.'

'I will be as touch and go as I can; but I should like to know the extent of the evil I want to legislate against.'

'My dear Lashmar, you can never legislate against the liberty of the operative—his divine right to sell his labour in the best market.'

'And to plot murder, and to conspire with his fellow-workers to bring about the ruin of his employer.'

'That's all nonsense. I mean the conspiracy. Murder is an occasional accident. There is no such thing as conspiracy. Thews and sinews are worth what they will fetch; and if men can make more of their labour by co-operation, they are right to co-operate. The fact remains that the employer generally gets rich and the workman invariably remains poor.'

'Employers are occasionally ruined.'

'By their own vices or extravagances, not by trade losses. They spend a hundred thousand pounds upon pictures and another hundred thousand in feasting their superiors, and then they go bankrupt. But is the operative to work for less than his labour is worth in the best market in order that his employer may build himself a palace and entertain the landed gentry? No, Lashmar, union is strength, and trade-unionism is the only defence of the penniless against the millionaire. But I didn't come here to argue, I want you to show me those papers.'

'What papers?' asked Lashmar, pretending not to understand.

'Boldwood's relics.'

'How keen you are. Upon my word you have all the eagerness of a boy.' Lashmar rose and went to a Chippendale cabinet, one of the gems of the library. It was the place in which his brother had kept all his private letters, and Lashmar had explored it six months after he came into his inheritance, curiously, sadly. That blighted and barren life had left fewest memorials. No woman had ever loved the hunchback lord, despite that sweetly pensive face of his, and a refinement that was almost womanly. It might have been that he had in him the power to win love and to keep it, but he had never tested that power; he had kept himself aloof from all feminine companionship until he took Boldwood's orphan child for his plaything.

The tin case was opened and the packet of papers laid on the table.

'These can be deciphered, I believe,' said Nestorius: 'they are only scorched and blackened by smoke, not charred. I am going up to London on business to-morrow; will you allow me to take these with me and place them in the hands of an expert for transcription?'

'If you really think it worth while. They may be papers of no importance—letters from duns, perhaps.'

'Boldwood would hardly have kept them in that tin case unless they were of some consequence. They may throw a light upon his life abroad—upon his marriage.'

'And on Stella's birth. I understand! It is your interest in her which makes you eager to find out all you can about her father.'

'Naturally. My interest is in the living, not in the dead.'

He opened the case and looked at the miniature.

'Stella's eyes!' he said, 'and the outline of Stella's cheek and chin. This must have been her grandfather.'

'You jump at conclusions quickly!'

'The fact seems obvious. Boldwood married in Spain. This is the face of a Spaniard. A Spanish snip made this coat. Oh, I know the country of Don Quixote, from Gibraltar to Biscay.'

'That is hardly the portrait of a gipsy.'

'Of course not, nor has your brother's *protégée* any of the characteristics of gipsydom. There is nothing of the nomad about her. Pride, not craft looks out of those splendid eyes. She comes of an old race, rooted in the land. Never came such an off-shoot as that from a wandering tribe of low-caste Indians. But these smoke-blackened letters may tell us something.'

'If they can be deciphered.

'If they can be deciphered? Why, it was but the other day when the calcined registers of the Parisian Record Office were transcribed by Parisian experts. There can be no difficulty about deciphering these.'

CHAPTER XII

'ALL HER SPIRITS IN A FLAME'

LADY LASHMAR was the last to hear of the interest which her dependent had awakened in the mind of her most distinguished visitor, but she did ultimately hear it from Lady Carminow who informed her in one breath that Mr. Nestorius had been making an absurd fuss about Stella, and in the next that it was no wonder he had all but shipwrecked the country.

'He is always in extremes,' said Lady Lashmar with a vexed air. 'It is like asking a firebrand into one's house. He is all poetry and nonsense. That pale face and mouse-like demeanour of Stella have caught his fancy. Of course, she is sly—these quiet girls always are sly. And she has lost no time in making up to the greatest man who has ever come her way.'

'Would you think she would have so much knowledge of the world, brought up in seclusion as she has been?'

'Cunning takes the place of knowledge. Old Verner has told her that Nestorius is a power, and she immediately makes up to Nestorius. She has a delightful voice, and I like her to read to me, but I really think I must get rid of her. I'm afraid she is an agitating person, and with my wretched health, I cannot afford to be agitated.'

'Lord Lashmar is positively angry at the ridiculous fuss Mr. Nestorius is making about the girl,' pursued Lady Carminow vindictively, 'I could see it in his manner at tea yesterday. It is so like a radical to come into a house and go into raptures about a servant. I wonder if he will discover any more geniuses among the housemaids. I'm sure the girl who attends to my bath has a very intelligent countenance.'

While Lady Carminow was fuming at the insolence which could see any charms except her own, the mild Mrs. Mulciber was trying to make friends with Jonathan Boldwood's daughter, and was beginning to establish familiar relations with her.

Mrs. Mulciber was one of those quietly-observant people, who talk very little, and who never acquire the reputation of being clever. Society agreed that Mrs. Mulciber was a very sensible person; but praise never went beyond that. She was a nice person to have in the house at all times, and in sickness she was an angel; but nobody credited her with talent. And yet Mrs. Mulciber had certain arts which were all her own, and which she had carried to perfection. She always knew everything that was going on around and about her: knew people's thoughts, hopes, wishes, loves and dislikes, almost better than they did themselves; knew exactly which way they were drifting even before they had begun to drift. Many a matrimonial estrangement might have stopped short of the divorce court, many an imprudent marriage might have been prevented, if people would have listened to Mrs. Mulciber. But these are cases in which people rarely will listen; and thus it is that things have been going wrong generally ever since the murder of Agamemnon.

For the tender passion in all its phases, from the silvery crescent of an awakening *penchant* to the broad golden disk of full-grown love, Mrs. Mulciber had the eye of a hawk. She saw at a glance that Mr. Nestorius's interest in the pale orphan with the beautiful eyes was something warmer and more enthralling than mere philanthropy. He was a childless widower, not five-and-fifty, rich, his own master. He had withdrawn himself from party-strife, and had leisure to find life empty without love. He was an enthusiast, a man who had ever seen his own particular objects and schemes fused in a rosy light; he was a man with whom to admire meant to adore; and he had that romantic and chivalrous temperament which would make an imprudent marriage more attractive than a prudent one.

When just such a man, at just such an age, allows himself to become interested in a girl of twenty, the result is almost a certainty. Mrs. Mulciber told herself that it would rest with Stella Boldwood whether she should become Mrs. Nestorius; and who could doubt that Lady Lashmar's dependent would welcome such a glorious escape from slavery, to say nothing of the fact that Mr. Nestorius was a man whom women were in the habit of adoring?

Moved by these considerations, Mrs. Mulciber made it her business to take Stella under her wing. There was not the least use in Stella being proud and reticent, bent upon keeping her own place and having no dealings with Lady Lashmar's guests, save that most distinguished of them whom chance had made her friend. Mrs. Mulciber's friendliness was irresistible. She lay in wait for Stella at odd times and seasons—in the

garden before breakfast, being ever an early riser; in the corridor before tea; in Stella's own little den of an evening, announcing herself with a modest tap at the door.

'Those silly people in the drawing-room are playing games. I have stolen away to get a little chat with you,' she would say with her friendly familiar air, and so on, until she had established an almost sentimental friendship, winding her arm round the girl's slender waist in a motherly fashion.

'What a willowy figure you have, child,' she said one day; 'I am sure you must be an elegant dancer.'

'I have never danced in my life.'

'Never! How hard that seems. And Lady Carminow, whose grandfather wheeled a barrow, has danced in all the great houses in London, and has sat on the dais with the royalties at the Marlboro' House dances.'

'Lady Carminow was born to good fortune; but I have never been unhappy for want of dances.'

'No doubt your dancing days are to come—all your good days are to come.'

'Not all my good days. The best are past. I never again can be as happy as I was in the library and on the river with the last Lord Lashmar. My life was all happiness then. The world was utterly beautiful!'

'Ah, that was only a childish happiness. We are all happy in our childhood, or fancy we have been so, looking back at it. Yes, you have a charming figure, Stella; but this black gown of yours, how dingy it is! Why do you never wear prettier gowns?'

'I wear what I am given,' answered Stella impatiently. 'Surely you must know that, Mrs.

Mulciber. I get my gowns when the other servants get theirs.'

'But you are not a servant; it is absurd to talk of yourself as a servant.'

'Perhaps it is, because in reality I am a slave. I have no wages. I have nothing in the world that belongs to me, and never have had since the last Lord Lashmar's death, except a few books which he gave me, and which his widow tried to take away from me. I got them back without her knowledge. It was almost as if I stole them, though they were my own.'

'Poor child! How you must hate this place, grand and beautiful as it is.'

'No I don't. I love it, because it is beautiful and because I was once so happy here. It is haunted by Lord Lashmar's spirit. I shall never love any other house as well.'

'Oh, yes you will. You will have a house of your own some day, and you will love that much better. The sense of possession and independence is so sweet. I am quite a poor woman, Stella; I spend the greater part of my life in other people's houses; but I have a little nest of my own by the sea, just a tiny little box in a narrow street off the East-cliff at Brighton, where I have my relics, my scraps of furniture from the father's vicarage and the poor husband's barrack-rooms, and I really think I am happier within those narrow walls, with my poor little tea-tray, my mutton chop, and my slavey to wait upon me than I am in a ducal palace. There is nothing like a house of one's own, Stella.'

The girl smiled, thinking of that fair vision of independence which might, perhaps, be speedily realised by the kindly aid of Mr. Nestorius. The cottage by the Avon, the days and evenings of

perfect leisure, and, sweetest of all, liberty, which she had never known since her benefactor's death.

'True, Mrs. Mulciber, one's own house must be very nice,' she said.

'You will know that when you are married and have a home of your own. Ah, who can tell how delightful a home! Such wonderful things happen now-a-days.'

Stella drew herself up proudly, with a defiant air almost; tall and straight and slim, she stood before Mrs. Mulciber like some young Amazon, untamed and untamable.

'Married!' she exclaimed; 'I shall never marry. Why, that would be to exchange one kind of bondage for another. I want to be independent, and free. That is my day-dream.'

'Ah, you will have another day-dream before long. I know what girls are, my love. I have spent a great part of my life in studying girls. I know their little ways.'

'You don't know my ways,' answered Stella. 'I am not like other girls. Remember what my life has been in this house. A happy, over-indulged child for seven sweet sunlit years, and then the world grew dark all at once, and I was a servant, a drudge, unloved, despised. I heard *him*, the proud master of this house, talk of me with his proud mother. Oh, God, that one piece of flesh and blood should think itself a creature apart from another piece of flesh and blood—that poor clay should look down upon clay. There are tones in his voice, and in her ladyship's, that make me feel a rebel and a savage to this day. Yes, even now, after I have read Plato, and learnt to understand the pettiness of our common life. No, I can never forget how kindly I have been treated in this house, and how cruelly.'

'You will only think of it all as a dream by-and-by, when you are happy,' cooed Mrs. Mulciber.

The girl had evidently no idea of her possible promotion. The bruised spirit still rankled under past and present humiliations. There was no forecaste of future glorification.

Mr. Nestorius was absent three days, during which interval everybody missed him, the women sorely. He had been the master-mind in all things—even in dumb crambo. The sonorous and sympathetic voice, the earnest gray eyes and pale, intellectual face, the gentle friendliness with every one from high to low, endeared him to all. Yes, he was a man whose absence made an immeasurable gap.

Gabriel Verner piteously bewailed that absence.

'His coming has given me new life,' he said; 'what shall I do when he has gone altogether?'

'I hope you will take advantage of his invitation and spend an occasional week in London,' answered Stella. 'You would see something of the world, and of your old friends.'

'I am too old for the world, my dear, and my old friends are too old for me. Their memories are worn to a blank where I am concerned. There are few men like Mr. Nestorius, who, at the very apogee of greatness, can remember a humble friend of their youth.'

Even Stella missed the statesman's visits to Verner's cottage. The old student's conversation, full of thought and of fact as it always was, had yet a vapid tone, as compared with that flow of vivid talk, sparkling, undulating, like water leaping over rocks; full of life, motion, variety; glinting, dancing buoyantly from theme to theme;

profound, yet playful; brilliant, yet intense. Since the world began, perhaps, or since Socrates drew all that was best and brightest among the youth of Athens to follow his footsteps and hang upon his eloquence, there had never been such a speaker as Nestorius; and for Stella, with a mind richly stored, and an imagination in all the freshness of youth, this talk was almost as a thing divine; yea, as that seven-stringed lyre, which led woods, and stayed running streams, and made savage tigers follow in sweet contentment.

She welcomed him with a happy smile, when they met unexpectedly in the park, on the gray October afternoon that witnessed his return.

'I was going to Verner's cottage,' he said, looking down at her with a smile, which she interpreted as paternal and protecting, but in which shrewd Mrs. Mulciber would have seen some touch of deeper feeling. 'I thought I should find you there.'

'I have only just left him. He will be so glad to see you again,' answered Stella simply.

'But I don't think I will go on there just now. I am rather tired after my journey, and I want to tell you some news.'

'News for me! You have heard something about my father,' she cried eagerly.

'No, child, no. It is of yourself. I gave your story to one of the keenest publishers in town—told him to make his reader give an opinion upon it instantly. He was to sit up all night to read it if need be, for I wanted the manuscript sent to the printer forthwith. The reader did sit up for the best part of the night, but of his own accord, Stella. He declares the story is the finest thing he has read by way of fiction for the last five years; full of power—fresh young power—untrained,

of course; but the style is incomparable. "Where did the writer get his style?" he asked. "It is so simple, yet so strong; scholarly, and yet original; almost as rich and vigorous as Milton's prose."

'I am so glad,' gasped Stella, dizzy with delight; 'and so very glad he thought the writer was a man.'

'Yes, that is always a good sign. Your book is being set up as fast as the compositors can work. You will have proofs—they will be directed under cover to me—by to-morrow night's post.'

'How delightful!' cried Stella, with almost childlike pleasure, and then, in a saddened tone she exclaimed, 'And to think that poor Mr. Verner could not get a publisher for his great book on Aristotle.'

'Ah, my child, great books have to wait. If Bacon were alive to-day I doubt if any publisher in London would produce his *Novum Organum*, except on commission.'

Mr. Nestorius did not add that Stella's novel was to be produced at his expense, and that the clever West-end publisher had only risked—an opinion.

The statesman was delighted at her girlish rapture. When a man of five-and-fifty stoops to admire a clever girl of nineteen, his admiration has a gentle protecting air, which is very sweet to the recipient; and from such a man as Nestorius kindness was like the notice of a god. Stella felt as if she were living in a new atmosphere, balmy, reposeful. She felt herself lifted out of the region of slavery and humiliation.

'What has come to you, Stella?' inquired her ladyship, in her coldly level tones, as the girl took her accustomed seat beside the sofa, at

the hour of afternoon tea, when every one else was in the library. It was one of Lady Lashmar's doubtful days, and she thought it not unadvisable to leave Lady Carminow at the head of affairs below. She had been vexed to find that her favourite was making so little progress in Lashmar's affections. He owned that she was beautiful, and thereupon quoted Maud:

'Faultily faultless, icily regular, splendidly null.'

This afternoon Lady Lashmar was startled by the expression of Stella's face. There was nothing icy there. A lovely carnation glowed on the pale olive cheeks, the splendid eyes were aflame with suppressed gladness.

'Yes, my slavery is endurable now, for it is nearly over,' the girl was saying to herself, as she took up a book and opened it where her ribbon marked the last reading.

'You seem in a state of feverish excitement,' said her ladyship. 'What have you been doing with yourself since you wrote my letters?'

'I have been in the village—with Mr. Verner.'

'That ought not to be a very exciting business. You are flushed and breathless as if you had been running,' with a displeased air, as it were complaining of a human machine that had got itself out of gear.

'I walked across the park very fast. I feared I might be late.'

'You are not actually late, but I was very nearly waiting,' answered her ladyship. 'Yes, it is five,' as the Sèvres time-piece chimed the hour, 'and I told you to be here at five. Don't come to me in this breathless state another time. And now go on with Middlemarch while I take tea.'

Stella read with sublime patience for the next

two hours, read till the dusk deepened; read on by lamplight, not knowing what she was reading, thinking of her own book all the while, and of what the publisher's reader had said of it. Was it true, that opinion of his? Was it worth anything? Had he only said as much to please Mr. Nestorius? Was the book really good; the style really pure? It was a very different kind of book to this great book which she was reading, with its sober, majestic phrases, its quiet humour, all things subdued to a minor key, all human passions kept in restraint. Her book was more daring—daring as Shelley, whom she adored. Her book was narrower, but more intense. Was it really good? Would people accept that bold incursion into the region of the supernatural; those mystic scenes which she had woven in the quiet of the night—visions which had seemed almost real to her in the midnight silence, weird speakers, whose voices she seemed verily to have heard? Her heart thrilled at the thought that if the book were successful, thousands would read it, and be drawn near to her mind, never knowing who or what she was, yet one with her by sympathy.

Were but this little book successful, her bondage would be at an end for ever. She wanted so little for freedom. She could live upon so little, she who had never had any money, or known what it was to have her wishes gratified since she was a child. One feeble ray of success would be light enough for her obscure path. Only to get out of this great, grand, beautiful house, in which she felt herself ever so much lower than a servant, a dependent, an encumbrance. Only to get away from the possibility of encountering those proud eyes and scornful lips, which always stirred her spirit to rebellion. She had schooled herself

to endure her ladyship's cold tyranny: but never could she so school herself as to look without angry feeling upon the man who had ordered her out of the library as if she had been a dog. Yes, he had driven her like a dog from that familiar room, in which she had lived so happily through all the sunny years of her childhood.

CHAPTER XIII

'AND THERE IN A NET HIS HEART WAS HOLDEN'

THE return of Mr. Nestorius enlivened the tea-meeting in the spacious library, where deepening shadows softened the dazzle of gold and colour into a harmonious blending of many tints, just as half-a-dozen faces photographed rapidly one upon the other produce a combination-face of greater beauty than the handsomest of the six. Mr. Nestorius was not a man who overwhelmed either the House or the *salon* with floods of talk. He was not one to say with Gambetta, *je les ai submergés;* but he talked well, and voice and conversation together had a rare and potent charm for feminine hearers. Lady Carminow handed him his tea-cup with a caressing smile.

'We have been perfectly wretched without you,' she said.

'It is worth all the pangs of absence to hear such a confession,' he answered, giving smile for smile, as he seated himself on a creepie stool at her elbow.

'And that is how you gratify your vanity at the cost of our suffering?' she answered laughingly, perfectly aware that Lashmar was admiring her from his stand in front of the fire-place, where he made one in a trinity of shooters.

No one could deny that she was lovely. The ivory and blush-rose tints of her complexion were set off by a tea gown of sea-green plush, with artfully introduced touches of coral-pink gleaming here and there amidst the green; and even the little foot, in its coral stocking and sea-green slipper was a point in the picture, poised lightly on the dark red velvet hassock. The flowing folds of plush just defined the perfect curves of the somewhat ample form. A sensuous beauty, perhaps; but are not goddesses sensuous?—save, indeed, Lady Sophia's prototype, the huntress Diana, who was never known to make herself agreeable to anybody, and who avenged herself for her much-vaunted celibacy by killing other people's children.

Yes, Lashmar's admiring eyes recognised that perfection of earthly loveliness, the charm of delicate colouring, the flowing lines and gracious curves, the alabaster wrist, and long, Titian-esque hand fluttering lightly over the low, round table, with the vermilion tea-tray and ivory-and-gold cups and saucers. Could any woman be lovelier or fitter to reign over such a house as Lashmar Castle, or to bring life and light into that dingy old barrack in Grosvenor Square, which required at least fifteen hundred pounds expended upon decoration and sanitary improvement before it would be habitable?

She was rich, too—rich, and very rich—and this was an important consideration to a nobleman who had five farms unlet out of thirteen, and

whose eight tenants were all in a complaining vein. The Lashmar rent-roll had been diminishing ever since Hubert's death; and although Lord Lashmar had other resources, and might be considered a rich man, there is always an idea of poverty in any diminution of income; while, if Mr. Nestorius and his brood were ever to get the upper hand again, the war against the landed proprietor would doubtless be renewed with redoubled vigour.

Assuredly Lady Carminow's wealth was not an attraction which any man in the present day could afford to ignore or to despise. Lashmar was not in love with her; but he began to think that he had been very much in love with her in the days that were gone, and that he was beginning to drift that way again. Perhaps he thought so all the more this afternoon, when he saw Nestorius seated at her elbow—Nestorius, who, albeit fifty-five years of age, had more than the charm of youth, whose voice had ever been as music in woman's ear.

'The most dangerous man in England,' thought Lashmar; 'all the more because he looks so thoroughly respectable.'

Lashmar told himself that Lady Carminow had made up her mind to take a second husband, and that if she did not marry him she would inevitably marry Nestorius.

'I cannot allow her to go over to the opposition,' he thought, and he went across to the low round table, found another creepie stool, and seated himself opposite Mr. Nestorius who seemed to be making himself mightily agreeable.

Mrs. Vavasour, also in a tea-gown—something Japanese and fantastical, with a cloud of gauzy *écru* lace about her throat and chin, had her little knot of admirers, among whom were Mr. Ponsonby,

the barrister, and the pompous old Rector, who had called Stella his Reynolds' child, and had forgotten her existence afterwards. This gentleman often dropped in to tea at the Castle, and dined there whenever he was asked. He loved smart people, and he liked to hear himself talk. Mr. Vavasour was discussing the lines of an intended novel with Lady Sophia, who, on the strength of her connection with the *Sunday Swash-buckler* considered herself quite a literary person.

'And your plot—tell me your plot,' she asked eagerly.

'Plot, my dear soul, nothing *démodé* as a novel with a plot nowadays. We leave plot to the men who write melodramas for the Adelphi—the old, old, old incidents shaken up in the old bag, and tumbling out haphazard in acts or chapters. Nothing of that kind for me, Lady Sophia. My novel is a novel of character—my chief incidents, well—a little look in the twilight—eyes meeting eyes across the deck of a steamer off Alexandria, or in a church at Venice—an angry word in the second volume—a fan dropped and picked up in the third. Those are the three central points—the three piers of my bridge—for the rest touch-and-go, Lady Sophia, all touch-and-go. Wit, satire, sentiment, introspection, self-communing, sparkle and play of words, lighter than thistle-down.'

'Your books are delicious,' murmured Lady Sophia, who did not care a straw for any novel without murder, arson, and bigamy. 'But I have sometimes thought that if you would—just for once in a way—make your heroine poison her father, or your hero drown his wife, it would be nice. Even in "Daniel Deronda" now, which is such a very superior book, there is drowning.'

'The one blot upon a great work, my dear Lady Sophia,' said the fashionable novelist, coiling up.

'I read that chapter twice over. Grandcourt and Gwendoline are too lovely. I always like the wicked people best.'

'There should be no wicked people in a book—no positive blacks and whites, only delicate tertiaries. You don't meet wicked people in society: "Most women have no characters at all." It is those no-character people who are so difficult to depict; and it is in painting *them* that the novelist shows himself a master of his art. Dickens's people and Thackeray's people are the broadest caricatures: Pecksniff—Becky Sharpe—the brothers Cheeryble—Colonel Newcome—daubs, my dear lady, daubs as coarse and glaring as the pictures of the fat woman and the living skeleton outside a booth, when tried by the standard of modern excellence.'

Stimulated by the idea of rivalry, Lord Lashmar threw a shade of tenderness into his talk with Lady Carminow across the tea-cups, which was very pleasant to the lady. She was quite as much in love with him as it was in her nature to be in love with any man. She had never forgotten her girlish flirtation with him, or the sweet things that he had said—sweet, meaningless little speeches, which charmed her without altogether compromising him. She had never forgiven him for his desertion; but anger was latent, not active. She was ready to forgive him directly, to forgive and, to adore him to her utmost capacity for adoration, would he but return to his allegiance, throw himself at her feet, and own her as the mistress of his soul.

'Surely I am good enough even for him,' she said to herself.

This afternoon there was a shade of tenderness in Lashmar's voice and manner, which seemed to her like the first note of subjection. He had struggled against her power, and now he was beginning to yield. Those beautiful azure eyes of hers looked smilingly into his, full of promise. She was his to take when he pleased—a rose in fullest bloom and beauty that he might wear on his breast only for the gathering. And how could he doubt that if he did not pluck the rose some wiser man would?

He drew his creepie-stool a little nearer to the fair tea-maker, bringing clay-bespattered corduroy in contact with the lights and shadows of sea-green plush, silken shining folds that reflected the glow of the burning logs yonder.

'What have you been doing all day?' he asked.

'Nothing. Do you know that Lashmar is the abode of dulness for your lady visitors, while you men are all shooting pheasants. I felt tempted to drive over to Brumm and take my afternoon tea at a coffee palace, and hear the operatives talk politics, just to get a sensation of some kind, so weary was I of this Castle of Indolence. But as I couldn't do that I walked over to the Hall and had a chat with mother, who insisted upon my going to look at some unhappy beasts that are being educated up to the next cattle-show with oil-cake and all sorts of abominations; and then my poor mother began to cry, and said that the shorthorns reminded her of my father, not because of any likeness, but because prize cattle were one of his fads, don't you know—and she has taken to all his fads, out of reverence for his memory. She pretends to be keen upon getting prizes, though I know

she pities the animals, and doesn't care a straw for the fuss and glorification of the thing. I hurried across the fields to be in time for tea—and oh, by-the-by, Mr. Nestorius, I saw you walking in the park with Lady Lashmar's reading girl.'

Nestorius flushed ever so slightly, with a vexed air.

'Yes, I met Miss Boldwood in the park.'

'Is that your idea of meeting? To my eye you seemed to be walking with her—but then I am ridiculously short-sighted.'

'I had met her—I turned back—and, at the moment you saw us, I was walking with her. Will that do, Lady Carminow?'

'It will do very well indeed, so long as Miss Boldwood is not spoiled by such distinguished notice.'

'Were you telling my brother's *protégée* the result of your experiments upon those papers?' asked Lashmar.

'No; but I will show you the result this evening, if you like,' answered Nestorius coolly.

'Is it a startling result? Does my mother's dependent turn out to be a princess in disguise?'

'We have not got so far as that; but there is quite enough in the transcription of those papers to interest you, and to assure you that Boldwood's wife was something better than a gipsy.'

'I am prepared to be interested,' said Lashmar, with a contemptuous air, as if he thought the whole thing a farce, and Nestorius's enthusiasm a sign of approaching senility. 'Why not produce the papers at once—they might interest Lady Carminow, who complains that I provide no amusement for my lady guests.'

'The records of the dead—of a broken heart, perhaps—are hardly to be discussed at a tea-table.

I'll bring them to the library to-night, when the evening's frivolities are over, and you and I can look through them quietly, before we go to bed.'

'As you please,' answered Lashmar: 'you are the master of the situation.'

'Do you know Spanish?'

'Hardly a word of it.'

'Then I *am* master of the situation, for the transcriptions are all in Spanish, and I shall have to translate them to you.'

It was half-past eleven when Nestorius and Lashmar went to the library—the former carrying a little portfolio with the papers he had brought from London. The evening had been livelier than usual, and Lashmar had hardly left Lady Carminow's side—to the delight of his mother, who watched the two from her arm-chair by the fireplace, where she sat in a kind of semi-royal state, with Mrs. Mulciber for her lady-in-waiting.

Yes, it was coming at last, the realisation of that long-cherished dream of hers. She would see Job Danebrook's estate united to the Lashmar acres, to say nothing of that much larger fortune in the shape of funded property which the iron-master had laid up for himself before he retired from business. She would see her beloved son attached to his ancestral home by the ties of domesticity, his stake in the country trebled, his social and political importance extended by increased wealth. And Clarice, the creature whom she had moulded to her own liking, would be her daughter; yes, daughter in love, as well as in law. She would hold her son's wife as a daughter—she, whom no girl-child had ever called mother!

Mr. Nestorius seated himself near a reading-lamp, and opened his portfolio.

'First, let me restore the original papers,' he said, handing Lashmar a packet. 'They are there, unreadable to the ordinary eye. You will keep them in trust for Stella. Here are the copies. Four are love-letters, pure and simple, written by the future Mrs. Boldwood to her husband. The fifth and last is from Mrs. Boldwood's father, and is dated two years after the date of the other four, and was written, as I understand it, just before Stella's birth. It is a letter that may have helped to bring about the mother's untimely death.'

'Will you be good enough to read them to me?' asked Lashmar, hating himself for never having learned Spanish. Such an easy language too—a mongrel tongue, half French and half Latin—a language he could have acquired in a fortnight. He had scampered through the Peninsula, allowing his courier to do all the talking for him; and he had come to seven-and-twenty years of age without having read Cervantes in the original. And now he had to sit like a school-boy and let that universal genius, Nestorius, expound these letters to him.

'N—yum, n—yum, n—yum!' began the statesman, murmuring gibberish, as he ran his eye over the page. 'Perhaps it is hardly worth your while to hear the love-letters. Such things are always alike.'

'I will have every word,' answered Lashmar: 'if you don't read them I shall think you don't know Spanish.'

'That is a challenge,' said Nestorius, 'so here goes.'

He cleared his throat, and began:

'"Alas! dear one, I know not where or when I can hope to meet you again. Not in the

church, or on the way to church. It is too dangerous. Nita never leaves me—and I had hard work to prevent her telling my father of our last meeting. I will be in the garden between seven and nine o'clock every evening. If there might be a chance that way, it would be so sweet to see you again, just for a few minutes by the little door, while Nita has gone into the house on some errand. You know how watchful she is and how she always brings her sewing out into the garden to sit with me. There is so little for her to do in the house of an evening. My father is almost always out of doors, at his club or with his friends.

'"How can you talk of your shabby coat, dearest? Do you think I value people for their coats? And if you are ever so poor now, you, who are so clever, are sure to be rich some day. Or if you are always poor it will make no difference to me. Nita says my father has a large fortune; but I have never seen any sign of riches in our house. We have no fine furniture, or plate, or jewels—only the things that my great grandfather had before the Peninsular War. We have all we want, but no more. If you could only see my father and talk to him, and get his consent to our marriage, I should be the happiest girl in Madrid.

'"Yours everlastingly,

'"INEZ."'

The next letter was more impassioned, and glanced at past meetings—at vows interchanged. The next, again, was a still wilder out-pouring of a girl's all-confiding love. No more talk of the father's consent. All was surrendered to the lover: 'Whatever may be your fate, I will share

it! I will go with you to the end of the world!' A second suitor had appeared—of noble family, wealthy, middle-aged, favoured by the father. The girl shrank from him with loathing, flung herself into the arms of her out-at-elbows Englishman: 'Take me away from them, dearest,' she pleaded, 'or my father will make me marry that man. He raged with anger when I told him that there was some one else I cared for. He swore he would lock me up till my wedding-day. Take me away, Juan, make me safely your wife before he can lock me up. No, dearest, I am not afraid of poverty with you.'

The last of the four letters was the briefest, arranging a rendezvous which was to end in an elopement.

Then, after an interval of two years, came the father's letter—brief, icy, incisive:

'You chose your own path in defiance of me. You may keep to it. Whether it lead you to the gutter or the grave is of no matter to me. You disobeyed and you deceived me for the sake of an English adventurer. You have your recompense in your adventurer's love. You say that he is still devoted, and that by the labour of his hands he earns your daily bread. You are better off than you have any right to expect to be; you, the disobedient, deceitful daughter. You tell me that a child will soon be born to you, and that you would win my forgiveness for yourself and bespeak my love for that unborn child. I answer you, that I have plucked you out of my heart, that you are for me neither loved nor hated, but non-existent. As for your unborn child, there is no beggar's brat about to be spawned in the alleys of this city whose birth will be more indifferent to me.

'X. O.'

These initials were the only signature. The only address was Madrid. Difficult to trace the writer by such indications.

'Are the language and orthography those of an educated person?' asked Lashmar.

'Undoubtedly.'

'And the date would agree with that of Stella's birth. Then we may dismiss the idea of a Gipsy origin.'

'I think so. This "X. O." may have belonged to the professional or the commercial classes. There is nothing in the girl's letters to imply that her people were noble; and, indeed, her father's eagerness to marry her to a suitor of good birth indicates that such a marriage would have been promotion.'

'And this vindictive father is perhaps the original of the miniature.'

'Most likely,' answered Nestorius, closing his portfolio. 'The costume is that of five-and-twenty to thirty years ago. A Spanish girl's elopement with an Englishman must have occasioned some talk at the time, even in so large a place as Madrid, and by careful inquiry one might find out all about the business, I take it.'

'Very likely; but the game is not worth the candle. This vindictive old wretch has positively renounced his granddaughter—nothing would be gained by unearthing him.'

'Who knows? Nineteen years may have made a considerable difference in his feelings. If he is still alive—a lonely, miserable old man—be might be very glad to acknowledge the granddaughter of whom he wrote in such brutal terms.'

'My dear Nestorius, it is so like you to see the thing in that rosy light. You have but to

take up an idea—to be interested in a question—and that fiery spirit of yours breathes around it and wraps it in a luminous atmosphere in which all outline is lost. How much more likely that the old brute is dead and rotten; or, if alive, so much the more a brute by the passage of those nineteen years. Anyhow I shall not turn sleuth-hound and hunt him. What are you going to do with those copies?'

'Keep them.'

'They can have no interest for you.'

'They can have none for you, as they are in a language you don't understand.'

'I am on the point of taking up Spanish. It has always been a reproach to me that I am not able to read Don Quixote in the original.'

'I'll give you a translation of these letters, and keep the Spanish for my pains.'

'Upon my soul one would think you were smitten by that girl of my brother's.'

'I am not smitten by her, but I am deeply interested in her fate. Good-night.'

'Good-night,' answered Lashmar moodily.

'There is something particularly exasperating about that man,' he said to himself, as he lighted his candle. 'I should like to know whether he is or is not in love with Lady Carminow.'

CHAPTER XIV

'SHE TOOK ME TO HER ELFIN GROT'

AFTER that evening Lashmar yielded himself to the allurements of Circe, in the person of Lady Carminow, with less reserve than he had shown hitherto, and in proportion as his attentions grew more marked Clarice became more enchanting. She had been piqued by his coldness; there was a smothered anger in her mind, linked with the memory of past ill-treatment. He could only atone to her by utter subjugation—by lying at her feet, as it were, her slave; and now it seemed to her that he was subjugated, and she began to forgive him. The consciousness of triumph became her. That splendid nullity of hers began to assume life and colour.

'Lady Carminow grows in beauty every day,' said Nestorius, who was a connoisseur in loveliness, and could admire a hundred women without giving his heart to one.

He had married early in life, married above him, gaining wealth and social status by his marriage. He had been an excellent husband to a somewhat silly wife. He had nursed her when she was sick, and buried her as became them both; and now he was free to choose another wife where he pleased. It seemed to the people who envied or hated him as if he could

have had the choice of all England, so devoted were Englishwomen to him whom so many Englishmen loved.

'Yes, she is superbly handsome,' answered Lashmar; 'but I don't think she is your style. You prefer something more original. Fenella, for instance, or Mignon—or that pale girl with the large eyes—my mother's amanuensis.'

'Your mother's amanuensis is not half so handsome as Lady Carminow.'

'But you admire her more. She is more interesting.'

'To me, yes.'

'To me she is positively repellent. There is something impish about her. I should have detested Fenella—a dumb creature with monkeyish tricks, leaping over banisters, and always turning up unexpectedly in odd places; and Mignon is worse, for she is more disreputable. This girl reminds me of both.'

'She is like neither. Those two were all passion: this one is all intellect. They had coarse, undisciplined natures: she has a grand, calm soul, steadfast and strong, and self-respecting.'

'That is to say she would not leap over banisters or dance upon eggs. She has fiery blood in her veins, for all her calmness of soul, the blood of the fiercest demagogue who ever stirred the lambs of Brumm to rapine and revolt. The blood of her runaway Spanish mother, too, all quicksilver. Beware of her, Nestorius.'

'I will beware for her, not of her; guard her from evil, if I can, but never fear evil from her.'

'Hear him, ye gods,' exclaimed Lashmar; 'it is all in the man's temperament. He sees all things in the rainbow light of his own imagination. He is like Titania when the spell was upon her.'

Assuredly Nestorius was not in love with Lady Carminow. Lashmar had to fear no rivalry in that quarter: and by this time Lashmar had decided that destiny meant him to be Lady Carminow's husband. He had escaped the doom once, had plucked himself out of the web: but this time he felt that he was caught. Even were he to make a good fight for freedom, get away a second time, he would have to come back in the end. He must dree his weird.

'I would rather be her second husband than her third,' he thought, 'and as it is written that I am to marry her, I had better propose at once.'

He said this to himself, yet did not immediately propose. There was a lurking repugnance somewhere in his mind, a reluctance which he could not explain to himself. He was angry with himself for not being more in love.

'I was born of a cold nature,' he thought.

He could account for his tepid emotions by no other theory than that nature had made him colder than other men. He fancied that he had even an aversion from women, and that he would have ended his days a bachelor were it not that self-interest and his mother's incessant prompting urged him to marriage. He had everything to gain from a union with Lady Carminow, and it was sheer wantonness in him to hang back: and yet he put off from day to day the utterance of those fatal words which would seal him as a slave for ever.

'What is any married man but a slave—a helot—a hireling?' he asked himself. 'First the slave of his wife, and then the slave of his children; and pushed into his grave, perhaps, by the follies of his grandchildren. The father of a family never can know which of his children is to be his bane—which

egg will produce the worst viper. He is responsible for the faults and follies of the whole brood, to the third and fourth generation, if he live long enough. Even after he is in his grave theorists will point to him as the root of evil—will excuse his descendants' delinquencies on the ground of heredity or atavism. And yet my mother moans at the idea of my *not* marrying, *not* having sons to succeed me, as if it were the direst calamity—certain loss instead of certain gain.'

This was a pessimistic view of the matter; but of late Lord Lashmar had inclined to pessimism as the only true gospel. He was discontented with life and with himself. He told himself that it was all on account of those five empty farms, and that the canker was only in his pocket.

'How happy Hubert was,' he thought, as he paced up and down the library one morning, after he had let the shooters go out by themselves, on the plea of letters which must be written by his own hand. The shooters had been gone a couple of hours and he had not dipped his pen in the ink. In another hour the luncheon gong would be sounding, and he would have to go and say sweet things to Lady Carminow, who appeared at luncheon with all the freshness of Venus Anadyomene, and expected a good deal of attention.

He had promised to drive to Brumm with Clarice and Mrs. Mulciber that afternoon, to go over the great Danebrook ironworks, of which Lady Carminow was sole proprietor. Her name was on all the carts and waggons, 'Clarice, Marchioness of Carminow.' Lashmar had never been over these mighty works, and he hated seeing works of any description—hated the thud of the engines, the smell of the furnaces, the grime and dust upon everything, and was not very fond even of the

operatives, though a humanitarian age insisted that they should be to him as brothers.

He felt also that this exploration of the works was in some measure a sign of his bondage. He would be looked upon as Lady Carminow's future husband. It was like putting his name to his own death-warrant. But into the dust and the grime and the heat and the glare he must go, having given his promise all too lightly last night in the reposeful atmosphere of the drawing-room, where to-morrow's energy seemed an inexhaustible fund. And now to-morrow had come, and he felt that an afternoon at the works would be ineffable boredom.

'Yes, my brother Hubert was the happiest fellow I ever knew,' he said to himself: 'happy in spite of great affliction, for he always lived his own life—did not go this way or that like a sheep before a drover, as we wretched creatures all do, we bondslaves of custom, fashion, self-interest. How well I remember him, in this room day after day, calm, restful, reading, meditating, writing a little. I must get his literary remains published, by-the-by; they would make an interesting volume. What a dull, empty life it seemed to me then; and now, by heaven, I almost envy him. He lived not alone, but with the giants of the past. His companions were Titans. And I—I have not looked at Homer since I left the University; I have not opened a volume of Shakespeare for more than a year. I am steeped in blue-books, and party pamphlets, and newspapers, the chaff of the day and hour, strewed on the wind and forgotten a year hence.'

He recalled his brother's figure sitting at the desk yonder, the crooked shoulders hidden in the deep arm-chair, one delicate hand supporting the pale

bent brow, the other on an open page of Greek or Roman poet, Elizabethan dramatist or modern philosopher. The radical's brat had been near him always in those last years, sitting at a table a little way off, writing a copy or an exercise, or at her benefactor's feet poring over a fairy tale. They two had looked so happy together, and yet it had always seemed to Victorian a most unnatural association.

And now the presence of that girl in the house worried him. Their chance meetings had been of the rarest; and yet he was always expecting to meet her on the stairs or in the corridors. He was always surprised when he went into his mother's room without finding her there.

He had made up his mind that she was sly, an intriguer, a dangerous element in the house. How quickly she had contrived to get that foolishly impressionable Nestorius into her web; and Mrs. Mulciber, a woman of the world who ought to have known better, was always sounding her praises. She had hoodwinked his brother when she was a mere child: and now the serpent had grown up, and her guile was of a still deeper cast.

Brumm and the outskirts of Brumm looked a little more detestable than usual to Lord Lashmar that October afternoon, although Lady Carminow was sitting opposite him, clad in ruddy brown velvet and sable tails, with a little sable bonnet that harmonised deliciously with her rich gold-brown hair. If the beauty of a woman or the luxury of a barouche on Cee springs could have sufficed him, he might have been happy; but on this particular afternoon he beheld even Lady Carminow's perfection with a jaundiced eye.

'Your velvet and fur will not be improved by

iron and coal dust,' he said, with a disparaging glance at her rich apparel.

'Oh, I have had this gown for ages. I should be rather glad to spoil it.'

Lashmar's eyes, in sheer absent-mindedness, noted the figures on the pavement: two half-clad factory girls fluttering by in cotton, hugging their shabby little shawls across their narrow chests, as they faced the east wind; and it struck him that the radical's howl against the inequality of fortune was one of those themes which would never lack listeners. Granted that every scheme which would equalise wealth is like absurd and impossible; yet there the contrast is, always before men's eyes, always calling out to them for redress—somehow, somewhere.

'Those two girls looked rather enviously at your sables,' he said, noting the long wistful stare which followed the fine lady in the fine carriage.

'You may be sure they have as grand gowns for Sundays—dog-skin, or cat-skin, and cheap velveteen. They always follow the fashions,' answered Clarice lightly.

'One can't help feeling sorry for them,' murmured Mrs. Mulciber.

'Yes, with that gentle, passive sorrow, which hurts nobody and does nobody any good,' answered Lashmar, with quiet scorn. 'If one of us were like that little Norfolk dressmaker now, who being one day suddenly moved to pity for a poor wretch in jail, took up her cross, and for ever after devoted her life to the help and solace of jail-prisoners; bore with them, comforted them, prayed for them; died in her patient slavery That is what real pity means; and how very little there is of it.'

Lady Carminow did not pursue the argument.

She was looking straight before her towards a great black gateway, gloomy as the entrance to Tartarus. They were in one of the dingiest streets in Brumm—Danebrook Lane, so called after the great Danebrook Iron-works, where Mr. Danebrook had established in this Midland centre works which rivalled in their magnitude those of Darlington, and competed with the Krupps and the Cockerills of Germany and Belgium. Lady Carminow could hear the chink of the steam-hammers; and she always heard that sound in this place with a faint thrill of pride. She had broad acres which gave her a position among the landed gentry, and of those she was proud; but these works were her kingdom. Here was the source of her wealth, and here she reigned supreme. The vastness of those Plutonian halls, the multitude of blackened faces, the clang of the engines, the roar of the furnaces, where the keels of mighty iron-clads and the connecting rods and cranks of large locomotives were welded and fashioned, impressed her woman's fancy with an idea of power. The factory was like an arsenal: and she seemed to herself strong as a Goddess of War, when she made her slow progress from hall to hall, preceded by deferential foremen and officials.

It pleased her to think that Lashmar would see her amidst these surroundings. She had given no notice of her coming, and it seemed to her as she alighted from her carriage in the great black quadrangle that the manager, who ran to receive her, was less effusive than usual. He was not less deferential; he bowed before her and spoke with bated breath, as to a queen; but he had a troubled look, which Lashmar's quick eye perceived.

'I'm afraid we've come at an awkward time,' he said; 'you've some gigantic job in hand, perhaps, in the throes of completion.'

'No, it is not that, my lord,' answered the manager gravely; 'that kind of thing never puts us out of gear. But it is hardly a good time for her ladyship to visit the works. Our men are on the eve of a strike.'

Lady Carminow laughed softly, pleasantly, as at an irresistible joke.

'That is a very old story,' she said. 'I have heard that all my life. My father used to say as much almost every time he came from the works. The men were always hatching mischief. The strike was always coming; but the strike never came.'

'Mr. Danebrook had an extraordinary influence over the men, an exceptional power of managing them. He contrived to ward off the strike—partly by that personal influence, partly by concessions; your ladyship has refused to——'

'To accede to demands which I consider preposterous—which my father would never have granted.'

'Your father would have gone with the times, Lady Carminow. He was too wise a man to try to stem a rising tide.'

'If some of us don't stand firm against that tide it will be over all our heads before long,' said Lady Carminow, looking like Bellona.

Lashmar would hardly have given her credit for so much spirit—or obstinacy—he did not know which to call it.

'The men have held on, though they are worse off as to current wages than other iron-workers in Brumm. They have held on for the sake of

those admirable funds which Mr. Danebrook established for sickness and old age. The prospect of bonuses and annuities has kept our men faithful to us at a disadvantage; but there is a very unpleasant feeling arising in the factory, an idea that the richest works in all Brumm pay the worst wages. In most other firms like ours work is done by the ton, by a ganger who undertakes the job, and employs men under him. This plan saves the firm a good deal of responsibility, and the men like it better, because they can earn more money, while an intelligent ganger may make a small fortune.'

'I will have no middle men in my business,' said Lady Carminow.

The manager bowed submissively.

'Your ladyship knows best,' he said; 'but I assure you there is a danger in getting old-fashioned. A system which answered admirably ten years ago is beginning to work awkwardly now. There was a time when we hadn't a single union man on the premises; but labour was scarce last winter when we had some of our biggest jobs in hand, and we were obliged to let in some of the union men. And now we must either give them what they want, or prepare for a strike.'

'If they strike we can get other men, I suppose?'

'Not a man—in England.'

'But we can get them from Belgium.'

The manager shrugged his shoulders dubiously.

'Belgian ironworks are in a very prosperous condition just now. I doubt if there are men to be had.'

'And if these men leave us they forfeit all claim upon my father's funds?'

'Naturally.'

'Then they will not go,' said Lady Carminow. 'Assuredly not the old hands, who have touched bonuses already, and have been working for annuities in the future. No man will forfeit the reward for which he has been working.'

'Anger is short-sighted, Lady Carminow. Radicalism has been gaining ground in this place ever since I can remember. Twenty years ago our hands were better off than any other workmen in Brumm. But wages have been going up, and our wages have remained the same. We point to our bonus system, our workmen's buildings, sound and cheap and well cared for, our annuities to the aged; but the modern workman is hardly grateful for these advantages; he doesn't much care what kind of hovel he pigs in, but he wants high wages, a drinking bout every pay-night, rump-steaks and onions for supper. He doesn't care about the future. You had better go with the tide, Lady Carminow, and let me raise the wages before the strike comes.'

'I would much rather shut up the works,' replied Clarice. 'Please do not let us discuss the question any longer. I have brought my friends to see the works, not to hear the usual doleful prophecies about strikes which never come. The Danebrook men know they are better off than any other men in Brumm.'

She led the way, walking rapidly past the manager's office into the heart of the citadel. He had hardly time to snatch up his hat, give a hurried direction to one of his clerks, and get in front of the little procession. A foreman appeared almost by magic, and amidst the din of huge engines, and in the heat and glare of giant furnaces, Lord Lashmar surveyed the source of Job Danebrook's fortune. He saw the half-finished

blocks of iron conveyed from shop to shop by the 'traveller,' a curious kind of steam monster working upon an overhead railway, thirty feet from the ground. He saw the huge unshapely mass of white hot faggots drawn from the roaring furnace by the steam crane, plucked as it were from the mouth of hell; just such a demoniac-seeming spectacle as he had beheld years before at Woolwich Arsenal, where he went as a boy to see the drawing of a gun. He saw the mighty steam-hammer fashion that iron protoplasm into form, weld and shape it into use and meaning; but amidst all the uncouth grandeur of the scene he noted the sullen faces of the men; heard more than one muttered sarcasm from smoke-blackened lips, as the great lady swept by in her splendour of velvet and fur. He kept as close as he could to her side all the time, ready to defend her should there be any hint of violence. He felt that the men were disaffected; and he was very glad when, after seeing a monotonous repetition of strange forms, and breathing noxious fumes of coal and red-hot iron, he was allowed to escape into the outer air. The smoke-charged atmosphere of Brumm seemed fresh and clear after those fiery vaults through which they had passed.

After the works had been done, Clarice insisted that her friends should see the workmen's houses, for which privilege Mrs. Mulciber was particularly eager.

'I confess myself a very stupid person wherever machinery is in question,' she said, 'but the dwellings of the poor are my delight. I am a member of the Dado Society, and I think I have made many a humble home happy by the introduction of an artistic wall-papering and a sage-

green delf jar here and there on a bracket. It always makes me sad to think of the many who have to live without dadoes.'

'I'm afraid our Brumm people would laugh at the Dado Society,' answered Clarice. 'They have no idea of beauty. You will see the most revolting objects in their rooms—artificial flowers under glass shades, bead mats, crochet anti-macassars, things that make one's blood run cold.'

'Poor things!' sighed Mrs. Mulciber. 'The day will come when the influence of the Dado Society will permeate this outer darkness, I hope.'

The workmen's houses formed two spacious quadrangles, opening one into the other through an archway, like a college. They had been built by Mr. Danebrook, and were of a sensible height, only three stories, with balconies to all the rooms, and a colonnade under which the children could run about in wet weather. There was also a spacious building, called the recreation house, in which the children played in the day-time, and where the adults amused themselves of an evening. There were baths and washhouses, and all modern accommodations and improvements. The architecture was utilitarian and substantial. There was no attempt at the Gothic or the Jacobian in any portion of the building. It was frankly ugly from garret to basement; but the rooms were all light and airy, the passages and staircases were wide and well ventilated.

They went into two or three different sitting-rooms, Lashmar feeling himself an intruder, Mrs. Mulciber in her glory, descanting upon the sweetness and light which the Dado Society could bring into these benighted dwellings. Clarice, calm and queenly, entering and leaving without apology; here and there telling a mother that her

children were not a credit to her in those dirty pinafores, or a housewife that her floor looked as if it had not been scrubbed for a month.

'You have nice rooms, if you would only learn to keep them nice,' she said to one woman.

'Wages are too low and wittles too dear for us to have much heart for finnicking over the rooms,' replied the matron, with a sulky air, bending down to stir the fire with her back to the visitors, and then lifting the lid of a saucepan which sent forth a hot blast of onions and grease.

Mrs. Mulciber tried to insinuate a suggestion of a bracket, or of the wonderful dado-istic effect that might be produced with a little distemper.

'Your husband could do it himself, my dear soul, don't you know,' murmured the lady. 'Just a pail of whitewash and a little red——'

'My husband would chuck the whitewash over my 'ed if I was to arst him any such rubbish,' answered the matron fiercely. 'We don't want no dadoses here; we wants higher wages and less humbug. Bonuses, indeed, and 'newities; we've got too long to wait for the bonuses, and we shall all be dead and rotten before the 'newities falls doo.'

Clarice felt that the atmosphere was uncongenial; that her father's system, which had answered admirably while he was there to administer things, was not working smoothly just now.

'The place is stifling,' she exclaimed; 'you all keep your rooms much too hot. I suppose that is because you get coals for nothing.'

'We'd need get somethink for nothink, when our husbands and sons are wearing their flesh off their bones to keep other folks in velvet and fur,' grumbled the matron, as her visitors departed.

Lady Carminow went back to her carriage, deeply

disgusted with the want of loyalty in her people. She had gone over the same ground with a party of friends a year ago, and had been received as a queen, the children bringing her a bouquet, the women curtseying and smiling, dazzled by her beauty and splendid raiment, the men deferential, eager to wait upon her footsteps and answer her questions.

The change was appalling and might presage some hitherto unimagined evil.

'The working classes are becoming detestable,' she said, as she leant back in her carriage, exhausted and depressed.

'They are not always as pleasant as they might be,' replied Lashmar. 'There is no place in the world where I feel so much out of my element as in Brumm. Half an hour in this hole always makes me fancy the old order is ending and that we shall all have to turn up our sleeves and work at the furnaces before long.'

'Those people positively adored my father,' said Clarice discontentedly.

'Ah, but he was one of them, you see, or made himself one of them,' replied Lashmar. 'I dare say he wore a shabby coat in the factory, and went about among the men, handling cranks, and not afraid of greasing his hands. You have the air of coming from a totally different world, of looking down at them from an immense altitude. That's what they don't like.'

'I shall never go near them again,' said Clarice. 'They may be very sure of that.'

She was deeply offended, touched in her womanly pride of beauty and grace. Never before had men looked upon her save with admiring eyes. Those sullen faces haunted her as she drove home through the twilight: and Lashmar, who might have been comforting and tender, held his peace,

and sat silently gazing at the misty autumn fields.

She had wished to show him her power as a queen in that black kingdom yonder, and she felt hurt and humiliated by the uncomfortable turn the whole thing had taken.

CHAPTER XV

'SHALL NOT THE GRIEF OF THE OLD TIME FOLLOW?'

It was between six and seven when Lashmar found himself at home again. Afternoon tea was over, and the shooters had departed to bath rooms and dressing-rooms, and there was the sound of a piano and a very thin soprano voice from the drawing-room, whereby Lashmar opined that Mrs. Vavasour was indulging in a ballad, alone or in company. He went to the library, intending to enjoy a quiet half-hour with the newspapers before he dressed.

The room was only lighted by the burning logs in one of the two fire-places, and a single lamp on a reading-table. The curtains had not been drawn, and as Lashmar crossed the room towards the lamp-light he saw two dark figures pacing slowly past the windows.

He opened a casement and looked out. A man and woman were standing a little way off in earnest conversation. The woman, black-robed, bare-headed, tall and straight and slim, was Stella. The man was Nestorius.

He was bending to speak to her, until it seemed to Lashmar that his lips must almost touch her hair. His hand was on her shoulder, as if he had been pleading or arguing with intensest meaning.

Suddenly Stella released herself from that detaining grasp, knelt for an instant at his feet, and clasped and kissed his hand with quick, passionate gestures, then rose as quickly as she had knelt, and rushed away to the other end of the terrace.

Only southern blood would have shown its feeling in such impassioned movements. Strange as the act was, it seemed in no wise false or theatrical. All was natural and spontaneous. To Lashmar, who had seen the girl silent, statuesque in her immobility, this new aspect of her character was startling in the extreme.

'Has she gone suddenly out of her wits?' he asked himself, angrily. 'Has Nestorius infected her with lunacy, or is she playing a deep game? Yes, that is it, no doubt. She means to hook our enthusiast. He is more impressionable than Ulysses, and she is as crafty as Calypso. Those silent women with lowered eyelids are always sly.'

He went out into the gloaming. Autumnal mists were rising all over the park. Night was coming up from the valley and the river like a palpable presence, a mighty winged monster spreading wide pinions over the earth, curtaining and covering homestead and meadow, man and beast, diffusing a false air of peace and silence and solemnity over all things.

There was no peace in Lashmar's breast, which was white hot with anger. Why he should be angry he never stopped to ask himself.

'The hussy,' he muttered; 'the artful, incorrigible hussy! This is the kind of woman

who leads wise men to ruin, who subverts class distinctions, who creeps into foolish women's houses and steals a husband's heart from his lawful wife.'

He saw her standing alone at the end of the terrace, above that tennis lawn where he and Clarice had played so often in days gone by. Nestorius had gone back to the house. She was leaning wearily against an antique vase, gazing into the night.

He could not command his temper; that white hot feeling in his breast must needs have some relief. Silence, calmness, were alike impossible. There is an unreasoning anger which must be satisfied, even at the loss of self-respect, which is surely the heaviest price that any man can pay for self-indulgence.

He walked quickly to the spot where Stella was standing, he placed himself by her side, but was not able to see her face, which was turned from him.

'Well,' he began, in his harshest voice, 'you have taken the measure of our statesman, Miss Boldwood. He is a man peculiarly susceptible to flattery, especially a woman's flattery, and your little bit of melodrama just now must have delighted him.'

She turned quickly and faced him, white as death as it seemed to him, in that dim light. Her face gleamed upon him like the face of a ghost. The large dark eyes, wet with tears, alone had a look of life.

'Were you listening and watching us from some corner, Lord Lashmar?' she asked contemptuously.

She had assured herself long ago that this man hated and despised her, and that it was a

duty she owed to herself to despise him. It was in her nature to feel and to do all things with an exceptional intensity. As she had loved her benefactor with all the force of her young heart, so she hated her benefactor's brother. She was ready to be insolent to him at the slightest provocation.

'I was neither listening nor watching; but I went to that window yonder to see who was promenading the terrace, and was just in time to see you fling yourself at our statesman's feet and kiss his hand. It was very prettily done, and I have little doubt it will have the desired effect.'

'Indeed. Pray what effect do you suppose I wish it to have?'

'My dear Miss Boldwood, when a young lady throws herself at a gentleman's feet, the obvious conclusion is that she wants to bring him to hers. It is taking a short cut to a *denouement* that hangs fire. And in the case of a young lady whose attractions are much greater than her fortune, and a wealthy widower, impressionable but wavering, one can conceive no better *coup de main* than that with which you have just surprised our friend Nestorius.'

'You think that I want to catch Mr. Nestorius as a husband?'

'What else can I think, having seen what I saw just now?'

'You are very quick in jumping at conclusions,' Lord Lashmar.'

'When the conclusion is so obvious the jump is inevitable, and it is a very small jump—only a gutter. Do you suppose that I have not understood your game for the last three weeks? That I have not marked your manœuvres, your lonely rambles across the park, and accidental meetings with Mr.

Nestorius on the way; your piteous revelations to him, your tears for the father whom you lost too long ago to have the faintest real feeling about him, always remembering how much you were a gainer by his loss?'

'A gainer!' she cried, 'to eat the bread of dependence in your mother's house. Do you think that is gain?'

'It is at least better than being a factory girl, which you would have been in all probability had your father lived.'

'Had he lived! Do you know for certain that he is dead?'

'I know as everybody else knows—that he perished in the attempt to save your life,' answered Lashmar, forgetting everything but his head-long anger; 'and I know that my brother, who was worth a dozen demagogues, risked his life to save a child whose face he had never seen. You have good need to be grateful to him.'

'Dead!' she faltered; 'your brother told me that he had gone away to a distant country. I thought, as I grew older, that he had left England because life here was too hard for him; that he had left me behind, intending to send for me if things went well with him in his new country. And then I thought that Fate had still been against him, and that he was waiting for the tide to turn, waiting to be rich enough to send for his only child; and now you tell me he was killed the night of the fire—killed in trying to save me! Oh, it was cruel, infamous, to deceive me so,' she cried passionately.

'It was your benefactor, the man who was more than a father to you, who told the lie.'

'Yes, but when he was gone—when I was older, better able to face sorrow, when I had to

bear a hard, bitter life, when no one would have been pained by my tears—why was I not told the truth then? Neither you nor Lady Lashmar have been so anxious to spare my feelings that you need have kept this grief from me. You have let me go on year after year, feeding on a false hope, dreaming a mocking dream.'

'It was an oversight on my mother's part and on mine,' said Lashmar, 'we ought to have told you the truth. My brother Hubert had a foolish sensitiveness on the subject, a morbid dread of your tears; but with us it was otherwise. We did wrong in not telling you. However, you have been in some wise a gainer, as your pathetic case has made a profound impression upon Mr. Nestorius; and that last touch of pathos—your belief in your father's existence many years after his death—has quite subdued him.'

'Mr. Nestorius has been very good to me, and I am deeply grateful to him; but if you think that I have schemed to win his regard——'

'I do think that you have so schemed, and that you have gone very near winning your game—not quite, perhaps—but your last move was admirable, and I anticipate the pleasure of congratulating you upon your promotion before Nestorius leaves the Castle.'

'Is that all you have to say to me, Lord Lashmar?'

'Yes, that is all, until I offer you my congratulations.'

'I thank you for your kindness and consideration. It is almost equal to that with which you sent me out of the library seven years ago.'

'Oh, you were a child then, and I am sorry to say you were a very unmannerly child. I hope you do not harbour resentment after all

these years, because I was a little rough with you that afternoon.'

'I do not harbour resentment. I do not care enough about you to resent your conduct to me in anything—no, not even your cruelty in trying to strangle every ambitious thought of my mind, every hope, and every dream, when your brother's death made my life desolate. I despise you too much to be resentful.'

'You despise me. That is rather strong.'

'I know of no words strong enough to express what I feel, when I remember how you have treated me — when I compare you and your brother.'

'Ah, there is a difference, is there not? But Hubert was cast in a different mould. He ought to have been a woman. I am a man.'

'I would not boast of that, if I were you, just after you have been unmanly enough to insult a friendless girl.'

'Friendless! What! when you have Nestorius as your friend, your adorer, your future husband, if you play out your game as well as you have begun it? Do not talk about friendlessness. Calypso is never without friends.'

She turned from him and walked quickly towards the house; he followed as quickly, and opened the library window for her to pass through. The action was polite, yet it reminded him of that other action, seven years ago, when he had flung open the door for her and told her to 'march.'

She had not forgotten. She turned on the threshold, and looked at him with flashing eyes.

'Why don't you tell me to "march"?' she said, 'as you did that other day. This time there is no need of your order. I am going to march.'

And so, with a short, angry laugh, she left him.

'What a she-devil,' he muttered. 'It is her Spanish blood, I suppose, and Boldwood's blood. A nice mixture! Yes, upon my soul, a very pleasant brew!'

He went back to the terrace, and tramped up and down till after the warning gong had sounded. Then he rushed to his dressing-room, and scrambled through his toilet; and to dress hurriedly was a thing he hated.

'What on earth did the creature mean when she said she was going to march,' he asked himself, as he bungled with his cambric tie.

CHAPTER XVI

'SHALL WE NOT LAUGH, SHALL WE NOT WEEP?'

NEVER had Lord Lashmar felt less inclined to play the host than upon this particular evening. He was so thoroughly out of temper that it was an effort to him to be even decently civil. Voices jarred upon his nerves, truisms and platitudes almost maddened him, and Mrs. Mulciber's gentle prosings about the Dado Society, and the awakening of the love of the beautiful in the mind of the artisan, made him feel murderous.

One relief, and one only, was afforded him.

'Did you know that Mr. Nestorius was going away, Lashmar?' asked his mother in the five minutes before dinner.

'No. You don't mean to say that he is gone?'

'Yes, he left an hour ago, in time for the 8.15 from Brumm. He sent me a hurried little note—business of State—something to do with the coming elections.'

'Oh, he had had a telegram, no doubt. No, I had no idea he was going to leave us.'

'I am dreadfully sorry,' sighed Lady Carminow. 'He has been a little *distrait* lately, but at his best he is quite the most delightful man in Europe.'

'That is a large order,' said Lashmar. 'Pray, have you met all the delightful Europeans?'

'I have met all the typical men,' replied

Clarice reprovingly; 'the men who are held up as examples—Parisians, Viennese, Belgians, Italians, Spaniards; one meets the best people of every nation, don't you know, in diplomatic society. I think I know all the men who have reputations, and not one of them has the fascination of Nestorius. It is a kind of glamour.'

'What a happy word!' exclaimed Mrs. Mulciber. 'Yes, it is glamour.'

Everybody agreed that the word fitted Mr. Nestorius like a glove. It was by glamour that he had secured majorities, wriggled himself out of difficulties, and led the British nation by the nose; and then they all went into dinner and enjoyed themselves just as much as if the glamourist had been there.

Lady Carminow was on Lashmar's right hand, as usual; but she found him a very disagreeable companion.

'How tired you look!' she said. 'I'm afraid the ironworks worried you.'

'Not at all; the ironworks are delightful. I envy you the sense of power you must feel when you survey that army of blackened faces; you must feel like Zenobia before she was conquered.'

'Zenobia never was beaten,' interjected Lady Sophia, across the table. She never could hear a classical name without referring it to the *Racing Calendar*. 'She was one of the finest two-year-olds that Lord Zetland ever owned. He sold her to Count Legrange for a pot of money, on the strength of her Newmarket successes, and she won the Grand Prix the year after.'

Lady Lashmar retired soon after the ladies left the dining-room, and it was about ten o'clock when Lord Lashmar, on his way to the drawing-room, was startled by a tremendous ringing of

his mother's bell, a summons so violent that he took fright and hurried at once to her ladyship's room, expecting to find her attacked by some direful illness.

She was not ill; but she was in a towering rage, and turned upon her offspring as a tigress on her cub.

'Where is Stella?' she asked.

'I have not the faintest idea. Is she not to be found, that you inquire so vehemently?'

'She is not to be found anywhere in this house. She was to have read to me at half-past nine. It is the first time she has ever disobeyed my orders.'

'She is getting too grand to obey orders. Perhaps she has gone off with Mr. Nestorius.'

'What do you mean?'

'Surely you have seen what has been going on under your eyes. The gentleman is impressionable—the lady artful. She has been trying to secure a wealthy husband. She has brought him to book, perhaps, and is off and over the border. They can be married before a Registrar in Brumm, or in London, to-morrow morning.'

'Nestorius could not be such a madman!'

'Who knows? He would not be the first to count the world well lost for love. If she has gone you may be sure he is concerned in her departure. She would not have the pluck to go out into the world alone—without the slightest knowledge of life outside these walls—without friends or money. But is it so certain that she has bolted? She may be only outstaying her time with old Verner, listening to some bookish twaddle.'

'We can very soon ascertain that,' said her ladyship, striking the spring bell which summoned her personal attendants.

Before it could be answered, Barker came in with the latest intelligence.

Stella had been seen to leave the Castle with a little carpet bag; one of the housemaids had met her on the back staircase and had asked her where she was going. 'Going away,' she had answered. 'For a holiday?' 'For ever.' The housemaid had concluded that Miss Boldwood had been dismissed by her ladyship, and had not considered it necessary to mention the fact till she heard Barker making inquiries.

'My servants are a regiment of fools,' said Lady Lashmar. 'Pray, at what hour did the housemaid meet this girl?'

'A little before nine o'clock.'

'That will do for the present, Barker,'—whereupon the patient Barker vanished.

'Nestorius left at seven, and was driven straight to the station. He can have had nothing to do with this girl's running away,' said her ladyship.

'He may have inspired it, may have planned to meet her in London.'

'No, Lashmar, Nestorius is above all things a gentleman; he would not wrong that girl even in thought. He would not compromise her by a scandalous elopement, or take a base advantage of his residence in my house. You must think of some one else.'

'There is no one else. It is horrible to think of that girl: alone, friendless, utterly ignorant of the world, penniless, not knowing which way to turn for a meal.'

He had been savagely angry with Stella that afternoon, had deemed no words too hard or too bitter, had scorned her as a schemer and an adventuress of the lowest type; and now that she

was gone from him, for ever perhaps, utterly beyond his reach, he thought of her in her helplessness with strangest, tenderest pity; thought of her as a mother who had been led away by anger might think of a rebellious child; pictured her, in her ignorance of life, falling a prey to the scoundrelism that lurks in great cities, to the traps and snares set for innocent feet.

'We must have been infernally cruel to her,' he exclaimed, 'that she should be driven to do this thing.'

'I don't know what you mean by cruelty. For the last two years, since she has been my reader and secretary, she has led the life of a lady. She has not soiled her delicate fingers. She has had her own sitting-room, her meals served to her alone, as if she had been a gentlewoman. She has been allowed to carry on her education at her own pleasure.'

'Granted; but have you treated her kindly? After all, even Boldwood's daughter is a thing of flesh and blood, with instincts and feelings, able to be glad and sorry. She would encroach no doubt, if treated too kindly; but do you think we have been too unkind?'

'I do not know what *we* may have been. I know that for my own part I have always been civil to her?'

'Civil; yes that is the word. But I believe there are some natures that cannot exist upon bare civility. There are souls which revolt against luxuries enjoyed upon sufferance. You did not do much to brighten her life, did you? She had to fall back upon books as the only possible delight; and for a young creature to have no other joys than she can get from books seems rather a dreary business. You did not dress her

over-smartly either, or gratify her youthful yearning for prettiness and bright colours. Her soul must have sickened at that perpetual black gown.'

'Are you mad, Lashmar, that you preach to me like this?'

'No, I am only remorseful, very remorseful. Great God! if we should have driven her into danger! Why, she knows no more of the outside world than a baby. But perhaps she has only gone to the nearest shelter; to old Verner's cottage. I will go and hunt for her there.'

'You go?'

'Yes, I would rather go myself. I shall be in a fever till she is found. I have been a wretch, a cold-hearted, vindictive brute. I have been systematically uncivil to her; I who know how fond my poor brother was of her; I who, for his sake, ought to have been kind. She had a bad influence upon me, somehow; she stirred something evil in my nature. I hope I shall find her with Verner.'

'I daresay you will, and you will exalt her idea of her own importance by going after her in person. You had much better send a stable boy.'

'No. I want a smoke in the open air. I'll go myself.'

He went, being a young man who always took his own way. It was an infinite relief to him to get away from those cold questioning eyes of his mother's, and to get out into the cool night air, the fresh, free October air blowing up from the river and swirling the newly-fallen leaves about him as he tramped across the park. Never had he been so disturbed in mind as he was about the flight of this girl. She was nothing to him, absolutely nothing, he told himself. It was only his guilty conscience which was punishing

him. He had allowed his prejudice, his dislike, to go too far. He had seen her suffering under his mother's icy tyranny, and had made no remonstrance—he who was young and prosperous and happy had done nothing for friendless and oppressed youth,—he who called himself a man had never pleaded for womanhood deprived of all womanly joys. And to-day he had gone further, had attacked a defenceless girl with most insulting speech. He had been brutal, offensive, ungentlemanlike. What was it to him if she had angled for a rich husband, schemed for home and position, for all those things which had been withheld from her? Was it his place to be angry?

If he should find her with his brother's old tutor, he was prepared to humiliate himself, to apologise for his unwarrantable anger, to promise her fairer treatment and a happier home in the future, to pledge himself that her life as a woman should be brighter than her girlhood had been.

The lamp was burning in the old bookworm's parlour, but he was alone with Aristotle and the rest of the learned dead. He had heard nothing of Stella's flight—was in the deepest distress at hearing of it. No, she had never told him any of her troubles, but he knew she was not happy, had never been happy in her home at the Castle since her benefactor's death.

'Her ladyship has a very fine character,' he said apologetically; 'but she has never understood Stella. The girl is altogether exceptional; she has genius, Lord Lashmar, original genius. The only person who has ever understood and appreciated her—except my humble self—is Mr. Nestorius.'

'Mr. Nestorius is in love with her,' said

Lashmar sharply. 'That is what understanding and appreciation mean in his case.'

'Well, it may be so,' replied the student thoughtfully. 'He certainly was profoundly interested in her. He seemed to take a delight in her society, would linger and linger when she was here, and hang upon her words. Perhaps it was on her account he came here so often.'

'Of course it was on her account. I tell you, Verner, he was over head and ears in love with her.'

'He is old enough to be her father.'

'What of that? A man of his temperament is never too old to fall in love. What are we to do, Verner? How are we to find this girl?'

He might as well have appealed to the shade of Aristotle. The old man was sorely distressed at his favourite's flight, but he had no suggestion to offer.

'I would walk bare-foot to London, if that would help,' he murmured.

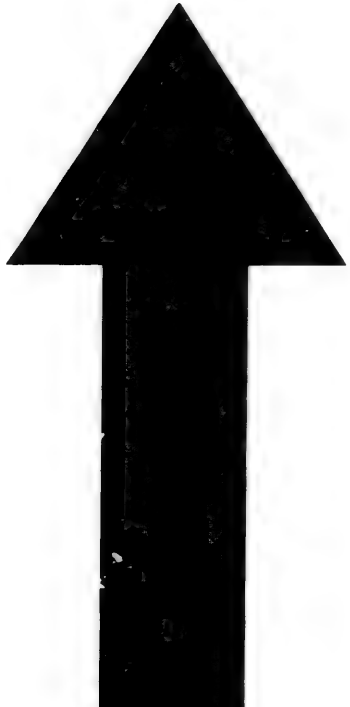
'But it wouldn't help. What we want is a bright idea. I'll telegraph to Nestorius the first thing to-morrow morning. If he had no hand in her flight he may help us to find her.'

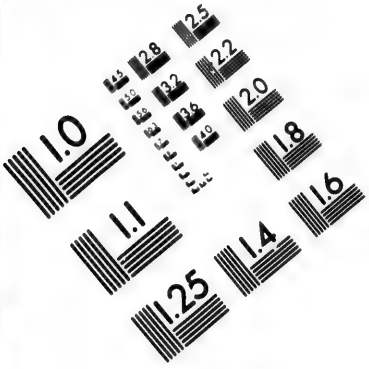
CHAPTER XVII

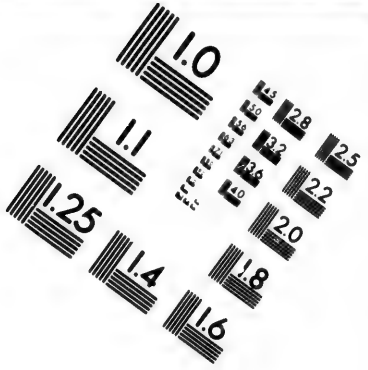
'THANKS TO THE HUMAN HEART BY WHICH WE LIVE'

SHE had gone, she had shaken the dust of that unfriendly home from off her feet, and had gone out into the more unfriendly world, penniless, without so much as the means to buy a loaf of bread. She had left a house that had become intolerable to her after that scene on the terrace. Those brutal speeches of Lashmar's had stung her like scorpions. She had not been clever enough, *rusée* enough to understand that such unreasonable anger from such a man was the highest tribute man can pay to woman—the tribute of passionate, unwarrantable jealousy, which implies love as passionate. She only felt his scorn, his injustice; and her dominant thought was to escape from him for ever, never to see that dark, imperious face again.

What a face it was! She had pictured Achilles with just those eyes, that dark, bent brow, those scornful lips, those quivering nostrils breathing rage, the very incarnation of anger—and Achilles, though she could but think him an unreasonable person, was her ideal hero. Hector, with all his virtues, had never so deeply moved her. While Lashmar was talking to Verner, the fugitive was far upon the road to Brumm, carrying her little bag, with a change of linen and half-a-dozen of her most cherished books—Homer, Virgil, Shake-







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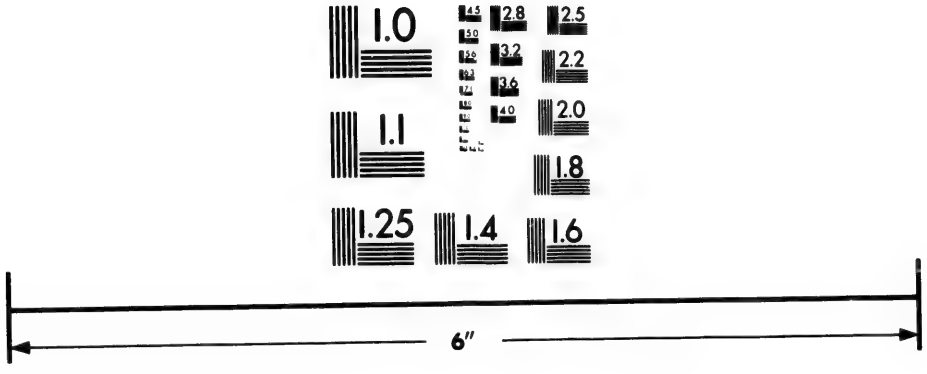

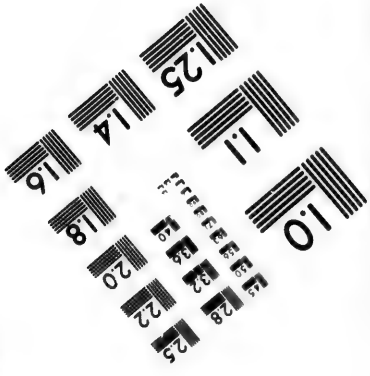

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speare. The books made the little bag a heavy burden for so long a distance. She shifted it from hand to hand very often, and sometimes almost groaned under the weight. She was tramping on to Brumm, knowing not how she should act when she got there. But Brumm was the city in which her father had lived and died. He had been known there, and had been popular among the lower classes. Somewhere in that great town, perhaps, she would find some one who remembered the demagogue, and who would be kind to his daughter. Hubert had told her once that her father had been a great orator, that but for the violence of his opinions he might have been a great politician.

It did not occur to her that she would be pursued or hunted for by any one belonging to the Castle. She fancied herself secure in her insignificance. Nobody had ever cared for her there, after the last Lord Lashmar's death. She had been useful to her ladyship as a reading machine, but that was all.

She had left the Castle in a tempest of angry feeling, had left without any scheme for her future, without thought of what she would do with herself when she was outside those doors; she had fled as a captive eagle escapes to the wild sky and the trackless mountains, like that Siberian eagle to which Lashmar had compared her; but in the long and weary walk to Brumm, upon the lonesome country road, under the dark October sky, she had ample leisure to consider her future.

The outlook was not cheerful. She had no one in the world who could help her, unless she should stoop to appeal to Mr. Nestorius: and he was just the one person to whom she felt she could

not appeal. He had asked her to be his wife, had been eager to devote his life to her, and she had rejected him; she could not ask him to provide for her future. Her good old friend Verner, was as helpless as a child; she could not burden him, nor could she have accepted a home under the shadow of Lashmar Castle. Her eager desire was to escape altogether from that old life and its associations; to hide herself, to lose her identity, if it were possible.

Her chief hope for the future was in her pen. If Nestorius had not been deceived by his regard for her, she had written a book which must sooner or later win her fame and money. She felt that it was in her to write many such books—to write upon many subjects. Her pen had been her friend and confidante for the last seven years. It was as natural to her to write as to live.

Secure, therefore, of being able to earn money in the future, to win for herself that snug little home she had so often discussed with Betsy Barker, she had only to bridge over the difficulties of the present, to earn or beg a home and a crust. Lashmar had told her that but for his mother's charity she would in all probability have been a factory girl. Even that thought did not appal her. She was ready to work in any factory that would find her employment. She would have her evenings for her books and her pen. Life would be harder, but not more joyless than it had been at Lashmar Castle.

At last the sweet odours of the country-side, the perfume of wildflowers, the cool freshness of newly ploughed earth, gave place to the fumes of furnaces, a pervading taint of soot and sulphur. The flaring lights of Brumm shone yellow against

the dark blue of night—the town was near at hand. There were the wildernesses of the suburbs, the unbuilt-upon building lots, the waste places, the desolations, the fields that were no longer fields, the half-finished streets to be passed; and then came the goal, a shabby street that seemed endless, a straggling, sordid, hopeless-looking street, stamped for ever as the abiding place of labour and poverty, with here a poor little shop and there a bloated, blazing public-house; with factories looming large and black; factory gates shut for the night, lamps extinguished, labour done, and groups of men and women clustered here and there, weary after the weary day.

It was not a pleasant place to come to for a soul that loved the country, and had dwelt amidst woodlands and the ripple of a river. Here was the same river, flowing sluggishly under an old smoke-blackened bridge, which Stella had to cross on her way to the heart of the town. What a murky, hideous river it was, that stream she had so loved ten miles nearer its source! Could ten miles make such a difference?

She had been only four years old at the time of the fire; yet she had an instinct that told her in which direction that great block of buildings had stood, the big house from which she had looked out of a window high up in the very sky, as it had seemed to her then, a window that looked straight out at sun or stars. She had loved to look out of the window in those long lonely days. It had been her only joy when her father was away.

She had dim memories, too, which helped her to find the place of her infancy. She recalled the prospect she had seen from the window in the sky. A little way off across a field or two

there had been a place full of white head-stones, and funeral urns, and weeping figures in white marble—ghosts, they had seemed to her in the twilight. She had been scared by those white phantoms sometimes, and had left the window shuddering.

She knew, therefore, that the huge barrack-like lodging-house had been on the same side of the town as the cemetery; and it was towards the cemetery she made her way.

It was after eleven o'clock, and most of the shops had closed by this time; but at the corner of a narrow street she found a shop-door open, and the light shining on the pavement in front of it. She looked in timidly, and saw two women, one elderly and stout, the other thin and waspish looking, of that doubtful period between eight-and-twenty and eight-and-thirty, in which unmarried womanhood is apt to turn to shrewishness. The shop was of the humblest order, known as a general shop, furnishing almost everything except butcher's meat, and of exceeding usefulness in a poor neighbourhood.

Stella looked from the thin daughter to the stout mother, and it was to the latter she addressed her questions.

'There used to be a large lodging-house for working-people near the cemetery,' she faltered. 'It was burnt down a good many years ago. Was it ever built up again?'

'Of course it was,' answered the younger woman sharply. 'If you'd gone twenty yards further you'd have seen it straight before you. It was rebuilt, and it was made twice the size it was at the beginning.'

'Was this shop here at the time of the fire?'

'Yes, twenty years before the fire,' answered

the mother. 'My daughter was born in this very house. I've lived in it nearly forty years. It was a new house when my husband came into it, and he had to make the business bit by bit.'

'As you have lived here so long, perhaps you may remember a man called Boldwood,' said Stella tremulously.

It was the first time she had ever pronounced that name to a stranger. It seemed a kind of sacrilege; but she felt that her only chance of finding a friend in this great dreary town was through her father's memory.

Boldwood—Jonathan Boldwood; yes, I should think I do remember him, drat him! My husband was almost cracked about that man, and used to go to hear him at every meeting, and come home with a pack of nonsense in his head. I hate your radicals, always knocking everything down, and never setting anything up. Radicals have driven all the country gentry away from Brumm; and there aren't half the carriages there used to be in the streets when I was a girl. Radicals have brought in Co-operative Stores, and ruined small tradespeople. Radicals have sent the English nobility abroad to spend their money, because they don't get the respect that's due to them at home.'

'What's this, old girl, off again? I never did hear such an old 'ooman to talk politics, and knows no more of 'em than a baby,' said a round good-natured voice from within, and a round-faced, good-natured looking man in shirt-sleeves and linen apron rolled in from the little parlour behind the shop. 'What's sent mother into highstrikes to-night?' he asked his daughter.

'This young person has been asking about Jonathan Boldwood.'

'Why, what do you know of Jonathan Boldwood, lass?'

'He was my father.'

'Your father! What, are you the child Boldwood tried to get out of the burning house when he lost his own life, poor chap, in trying to save the little one?'

'Yes,' sobbed Stella.

'And then the young hunchback lord saved you, and took you off to Lashmar Castle, and adopted of you. I know there was no end of talk about it at the time.'

'Yes; but he has been dead for many years, and I have been very miserable in dependence upon fine people.'

'Ah, there spoke old Boldwood. No dependence for him. He was a free and noble spirit God bless him! They say its only Papists that pray for the dead. Now I'm no Papist, and I'm no churchgoer; but I say wherever Boldwood is, God bless him. And so you've got sick of your fine home, lassie; and you've come to look up your father's old friends in Brumm?'

'Had he friends here—many friends?'

'Yes, many friends—there wasn't a working man in Brumm that didn't call him friend; but not such friends as could be of much use to him. Most of 'em was poorer than himself. He was proud too, and wouldn't have taken a favour from any of us. We all knew that he had been born a gentleman. Let's have a look at you, lass,' scrutinizing her keenly under the glare of the unshaded gas; 'no, you're not like him—there's a look, perhaps, only a look of him somewheres in the face, but it ain't so much as a likeness. Poor Boldwood—yes, he was a grand talker, he was. If he'd been alive now we'd have got him into

Parliament. Wouldn't he have astonished the milk-and-watery gentlemen who grind in *that* mill. And what are you doing in Brumm at such an hour as this, my lass?'

'I have come to look for work.'

'What kind of work?'

'Any kind that will give me food and shelter—time to find the work I can do best.'

'What kind of work is that?'

'Writing. I want to be a writer.'

She answered this strange shopkeeper as frankly as she would have answered an old friend. The man had known and esteemed her father; and there was something in his blunt, unpolished friendliness which gave her confidence. Perhaps in all that big populous town she had crossed the one threshold in which she was safest. The grocer's daughter looked somewhat critical and suspicious, but his wife had a kindly, motherly air, which promised help.

'A writer, ay, Boldwood was a writer. He used to write letters to the *Independent*. Such letters! they lashed the Conservatives like a cat-o-nine-tails. And so you can write, my lass. Story-books, I suppose, and such like.'

'Yes, I have written a story; but till I can live by my pen I want to get work in a factory.'

'Ah, my girl, you don't look much like factory work. Why, you look so slight one could blow you away. You look too much the lady. You'd better have stayed at Lashmar Castle than turn factory girl.'

'I could not stay there.'

'They turned you adrift, perhaps.'

'No, but the place became too hateful. Don't question me, please; I have done nothing wrong,

unless it was wrong to come away from a house in which I was miserable.'

'Come now, lass, did they ill-treat you, beat you, starve you?'

'No, they only made me wretched. I suffered patiently enough for many years; suffered the want of all kindness and sympathy; but the time came when I made up my mind not to suffer any longer; that bread-and-water in a garret would be better than dainty food in a grand house where nobody loved me. I am quite a stranger, and I shall be quite alone in this big town; but I shall be able to live my own life, to win independence; I shall cease to eat the bread of charity.'

'I see, you have a proud spirit. Well, there's some factory work that's lighter than others, though it's all hard. I'll see if I can get you work to-morrow, if you like. It oughtn't to be very difficult, for there isn't a Rad in Brumm that wouldn't befriend Boldwood's daughter.'

'I shall be very grateful to you,' said Stella; and then turning to his wife she said, 'If you would be so kind as to tell me where I can get a respectable lodging. It must be cheap, for I shall have no money except what I can earn."

'A lodging! Do you mean to say you have no home in Brumm?'

'No; I only left Lashmar Castle this evening. I walked all the way here. I have no money, and unless people will trust me with a lodging I must walk about in the fields all night.'

'Or go to the casual ward at the Union. Jonathan Boldwood's daughter shall do neither,' said the grocer. 'Look here, mother, there's Bill's room. You give this young woman a shake-down in Bill's room. It's too late for her

to be looking for a lodging. Time enough to think of that to-morrow morning.'

'You are very good,' faltered Stella.

She had been standing until this moment, her feet aching after her long walk, her arms strained by the weight of the little carpet bag. There was a stool in the shop, and now she ventured to seat herself, feeling that she was really among friends.

Chapman, her new protector, shut and bolted the shop door. It was a very small shop, crowded with small wares; odorous of cheese, bacon, herrings, and even of onions, a rope of which hung in a corner, in friendly neighbourhood with a pile of quartern loaves. Pickle jars, cheap jam, and every variety of tinned provisions with brilliant pictorial labels filled the shelves. There was an air of rude plenty, which hinted at a brisk trade, small profits and quick returns.

By this time even the old-maidish daughter had assumed a friendly air.

'Come into the parlour and rest yourself,' she said. 'We've had our bit of supper, but perhaps you'd like a crust of bread and cheese.'

'Of course she would,' said Chapman; 'can't you see how white and tired she looks, poor child —reg'lar done up. Bring out the loaf, Polly, and a bit o' pickle, and a mug o' beer.'

'Not any beer, thank you, just a little bit of bread-and-butter, if you please.'

The little parlour was neatly kept. There was a stand of geraniums in front of the window, with a bird-cage hanging over it. The room had a curious look to Stella after the stately splendours amidst which she had lived, but it was more home-like than the still-room at Lashmar, and she liked the Chapmans better than the upper

and under housemaids with whom she had spent one weary period of her life.

Polly's heart softened to her as she sat there in the gas-light, looking so pale, and faint, and helpless, so utterly different from the robust young women and the obese matrons who patronised Mr. Chapman's shop. She looked like some wan, white flower that had grown in the depths of a wood, remote from the sun. Polly was a devourer of periodical literature, and she began to imagine a romantic history for Boldwood's daughter, who had come in among them in such a sudden mysterious way. The name and history of Jonathan Boldwood were not unknown to Miss Chapman. She had gone with her father to hear the demagogue at open-air meetings, when she was a young girl. She had been moved by the enthusiasm of the crowd, and had felt that this strong, rugged-looking man, with the deep sonorous voice, was in some wise a hero, and had admired him, hardly knowing why. And now she looked with interest at this girl with the large dark eyes and small pale face, which in its delicate fashioning had a deeper charm than mere sensuous beauty. She seated herself on the little horse-hair sofa beside Stella, and drew closer to her, while Mrs. Chapman was bustling about between the table and the cupboard where the provisions were kept.

'It must have been very nice living at Lashmar Castle,' she said, devouring Stella with her keen, inquisitive eyes. 'I saw the place on the outside, and the gardens and statues and fountains and things, one bank holiday, when a lot of us drove that way in a break, and tea'd at the inn in the village. What a lovely old house! I don't think I should have wanted to run away from such a home as that.'

'I don't think you would have been happy in a house where nobody cared for you.'

'Ah, but didn't somebody care for you—wasn't there some one who cared too much, perhaps—some one above you in station—a lord, perhaps—some one you could have loved with all your heart only you durstn't?'

'I don't know what you mean,' answered Stella, drawing herself up haughtily, and beginning to think that Miss Chapman was even worse than the housemaids. 'The only person I ever loved in that house was the last Lord Lashmar, who died when I was a child.'

'Ah, he was good to you, wasn't he? I've heard the story many a time—just like a novel, only it goes to one's heart more. But the present Lord Lashmar? Hasn't he been kind to you? What a fine man he is! I've seen him drive his four-in-hand through Brumm. Such a handsome fellow, just what a lord ought to be. Wasn't he kind, like his brother?'

'He was the very opposite of his brother in every way. Please don't talk about him.'

'Don't tease her, Polly,' said the mother, cutting a slice of bread-and-butter: 'don't you see how tired she is, poor child? and she don't want to be worried. Now, my dear, try and eat a bit of supper, while I go up and get your room ready. It's clean anyhow. That I'll answer for.'

The little bedroom on the half flight, which had been the son's room—son now away on a big engineering job in the Mediterranean—was as clean as soap and water and unstinted labour could make it. Stella lay down to rest in the narrow bed, so utterly weary that she felt like a child in its mother's lap, helpless, careless almost of all things except that sweet sense of rest, un-

anxious as to what the morrow might bring forth, leaving all to Providence, which had been so kind to her to-night. The room was very small: it seemed to Stella like a box, the sides of which were close enough for her to touch with her outspread hands; but it was a friendly shelter, and she was too tired to wonder at being in a strange place.

She slept deliciously till seven, when she was awakened by much movement in the house. She got up and dressed herself and went downstairs, where she found the Chapman family breakfasting in a snug little kitchen, with whitewashed walls and a dresser rich in cheap crockery. Stella was welcomed to the breakfast-table, and introduced to the family cat, which was a personage of distinction in the household, and which took kindly to the stranger.

'They know their friends,' said the good-natured Chapman. 'I've seen that cat swell out his tail as thick as a German sausage at the sight of a stranger; and spit and snarl he do, as bad as a rattlesnake. Don't you, Tom?'

Tom rubbed himself against his patron's legs in acknowledgment of this idiosyncrasy. He was black and big and sleek, and had white stockings of miraculous purity, considering that he spent most of his life under the grate.

'Do you know, Miss Boldwood,' began the grocer, in a hearty tone, 'me and my missus and Polly here have just had our little mag about you; and we've come to the conclusion that there ain't no use in your worriting about factory work. It ain't in your line, and you wouldn't do no good at it. What is there now as you could do? There's pens—and there's pins—and there's lucifers. Fancy them pretty little fingers toiling

at lucifers! You wouldn't be half as clever at it as the Brumm girls who've done it from their cradles. You'd find you wasn't in it, as the saying is, and you'd feel humiliated and down-hearted.'

'I must bear that,' said Stella firmly. 'I have to earn my bread somehow.'

'Somehow, yes, that's where it is. You ain't bound to earn your bread in a factory. If you feel it's in you to write pretty stories, and make your name as a writer, why not begin at it?'

Stella sighed and shook her head.

'I've read over and over again of the difficulty of beginning such a life,' she said. 'It is almost impossible to earn a living at the first. There must be years wasted—a long apprenticeship to labour, disappointment, and dependence. Now, I have no one to help me. I must earn my bread while I am trying to write something that may bring me money later.'

'Ah, but you can't do that while you're earning your bread in a factory, my lass,' said Chapman; 'don't dream of such a thing. It ain't to be done. A factory will take it out of you. There'll be nothing left in you for inventing pretty stories. Now if you could get a bit of copying to do, it 'ud be different.'

There is a common idea that money may always be made by copying or translating. People have the vaguest notion of what there is to be translated or copied. No one asks himself or herself why this perennial flow of French novels or legal documents—whence they come and whither they go?—but the idea prevails that the woman who can put French into English, or copy a manuscript in a fair round hand, may always find genteel employment.

'Yes, I could do copying or translating,' answered Stella. 'I know two or three languages —French, German, Italian, Latin, and Greek.'

'Lord a' mercy on us!'

'One language helps another when one is fond of languages,' said Stella modestly. 'Lord Lashmar taught me the beginning; and when he was gone, I taught myself. My books were my only friends.'

'Why, you ought to be able to make a fortune.'

'And you have written stories?' asked Polly deeply interested—'regular novels?'

'Not so long as ordinary novels. Stories about as long as one volume of a novel. They are very foolish, I dare say; but it was a kind of happiness to me to write them. They took me out of my own life.'

'Yes, I can understand that,' said Polly: 'they lifted you up into a different world where all things were beautiful. I have felt that often when I have been reading—sitting here in this little kitchen—I have fancied myself in some lovely drawing-room where the curtains were all velvet and lace, a . where the ladies threw out a cloud of perfume as they glided about—and where there was the sound of a fountain from the conservatory, and palms. I do so love palms! I never saw one, but the very look of the word is lovely. And then when I look up and see this old kitchen of ours, and the Dutch clock, and the warming-pan there, all so common and homely, I feel as if I had wakened out of a delicious dream.'

'Yes, and that's how you neglect the house work, or let any one stand in the shop till they're tired o' waiting to be served,' said the practical Mrs. Chapman. 'I do think as how novel-reading is the bane of a young woman's life.'

'There's times for everythink, and novel reading ain't no harm at the proper time,' said the more liberal husband. 'Of an evening, when the day's work is pretty well over, I'd rather see my daughter with her nose in a novel, than hear her wag her tongue about her neighbours, and talk of things which she didn't ought even to know about, much less talk of. A novel's safer reading for a respectable young female than a newspaper any day.'

'Have you your stories with you?' asked Polly.

Stella blushed at the question.

'Yes, I brought all my papers with me in that little carpet bag.'

'Would you mind letting me read one? I'm not much of a judge, but I've read a good many novels that I've got from the Free Library,' pleaded Polly.

'If you would like to read one—'

'I should of all things: and, father, don't you think Jem Barsby might help Miss Boldwood in some way. He's a clever young man, and they think a lot of him at the office.'

Jem Barsby was a hanger-on or admirer of Polly's, who was not actually engaged to her, had not been promoted to the proud position of keeping company, but who was allowed to walk out with her occasionally, as a worthy young man, who knew his place and might be trusted, which confidence, seeing that Polly was seven years his senior, was not undeserved.

Jem was a printer's reader and factotum at the office of the *Independent*, and ranked as a literary man among the Chapmans and their circle.

Now it seemed to Polly that Jem's influence ought to smooth the paths of literature for any beginner.

'Do let me have a read of one of your stories,' entreated Polly.

'I tell you what it is, Miss Boldwood, you'd better stay with us for a week or two, while you look about you,' said honest Chapman. 'Jonathan Boldwood's daughter shall never want for a home while I've a roof over my head. We're homely people, mother and me; but Polly there has cultivated her mind a bit, and she'll be company for you. Stay with us as long as you like, my dear.'

Mrs. Chapman added a kindly word of her own to confirm the invitation, and Polly put her arm round Stella's neck and kissed her.

'I don't often take to anyone, but I have took to you,' she said; 'and I think it's because you've got a mind. I worship mind.'

Stella's eyes filled with sudden tears.

'You are all so good to me,' she faltered, 'and I value your kindness all the more because it is given for my father's sake—my dear father, whose face I can hardly remember. Till yesterday I used to hope and dream about seeing him again—that he would come back to me from the other side of the world—and yesterday I was told how he died in the attempt to save me.'

She burst into a passionate fit of sobbing, and it was some minutes before she could tranquillise herself, even with the aid of Polly's comforting hugs.

'Yes, I will stay with you, if I may, kindest friends,' she said; 'I shall be happier—more at peace here than I can be anywhere else.'

More at peace, yes! it was peace she sighed for. At the Castle she had not been at peace. There had been a passionate revolt for ever going on in her soul, a revolt against that servitude which she bore so meekly, a sense of wounded

pride which a princess of the blood royal might have felt. And she had never suffered that agony of inward shame so acutely as when Victorian was at the Castle. His very presence under that roof moved her to rebellion.

So the friendly compact between the demagogue's daughter and that honest and somewhat mild Radical, Mr. Chapman, was sealed. Stella was to occupy the little room on the half-flight as long as she liked, and was to have as many little stone bottles of ink out of the shop, and as many of those steel nibs, which Mr. Chapman bought at sevenpence a gross and retailed at four a penny, as ever she chose to consume; she was to be free from the burden of sordid daily cares, and might scribble away to her heart's content, filling the little room with spirits as vast and wonderful as the Afrite that came out of the fisherman's bottle.

Polly spent the whole day devouring a manuscript story, and wholly absorbed in the fiction, and even offering the writer the tribute of an occasional tear.

Jem Barsby dropped in at tea-time—not the elegant five o'clock tea of polite life, but a solid seven o'clock meal which marked the close of the day's labour, and served at once for tea and supper. At this autumnal season sausages were supposed to be in their prime, and bloaters still meritorious. Very savoury was the board which Mrs. Chapman spread in her cosy little kitchen where the family meals were usually eaten; with one ceremonious exception made in favour of Sunday tea, which was always served in the parlour.

Jem listened intently to the account of Miss Boldwood's literary proclivities, and to Polly's glowing description of the story she had just been reading.

'We ought to be able to find something for you to do at our place,' said Jem grandly, with the air of a sub-editor at the very least. 'Do you think you could manage a London letter?'

'Lor,' Jem, why, she's never been in London in her life.'

'Ah,' sighed Mr. Barsby, 'that's against it, ain't it?—or else if she had a nice smart way of putting any little bit of news or scandal she could pick up, I might get our folks to start a "Lounger at the Clubs," don't you see?'

The Chapmans saw the possibility of this, had Stella been altogether a different person.

'Or if she'd been thoroughly up to trap about the theatres, now! Half a column of green-room gossip three times a week would go down like butter-scotch with our subscribers.'

'But, my dear Jem,' remonstrated Polly, vexed at her admirer's obtuseness, 'Miss Boldwood is a novelist—a born novelist. She has written the loveliest story I have read for ever so long.'

'Ah! but that's a big line. I don't see a chance for her with that game. Why, our proprietors give their thousands and fifteen hundreds down for a *foolliton*, and they want big names. If she were only to make a success now, they'd have her to-morrow. Perhaps if she was to knock off a little story for the Christmas Number I might get our chief to look at it: and if he were to like it, and could find room for it: there'd be a fi'pun' note in Miss Boldwood's pocket, and it would be getting in the thin end of the wedge into the bargain.'

'I'll try,' said Stella; 'it is very kind of you to interest yourself for me.'

CHAPTER XVIII

'THE ORACLES ARE DUMB.'

LORD LASHMAR'S telegram to Mr. Nestorius, sent as soon as the village post-office opened on the morning after Stella's flight, brought no reply until late in the afternoon, when there came an answer from a ducal seat in the neighbourhood of Edinburgh, to the effect that Mr. Nestorius would be at Lashmar Castle next morning.

'He is not afraid to face us,' said Lashmar, relieved by this reply; for in spite of her ladyship's conviction to the contrary, he had been tortured all last night and all that day by a rankling suspicion that Nestorius had induced Stella to elope with him, and that his intentions were not altogether honourable.

Lady Carminow did not attempt to hide her disgust at the fuss that was being made about Stella's flight.

'I had no idea that Lady Lashmar's reading girl was the most important person in the house,' she said at luncheon, when Lashmar, who was utterly unskilled in concealing his feelings, fretted and fumed at the non-arrival of any reply to his telegram, and the non-result of his own inquiries in Brumm, where he had spent the morning tramping about with a detective.

'She is very important to my mother,' answered Lashmar moodily; 'no one else can read as well;

and to be read to is the only relief for my mother's nerves.'

'You should write to Mrs. Dallas for a good reader. I daresay in her elocution classes she has a dozen girls who can read better than Miss Boldwood.'

'I doubt it: with her reading was a gift—voice, enunciation, all were perfect. To hear her read Milton was like church music. I happened to go into her ladyship's room one morning in the middle of "Lycidas," and I stopped on the threshold, spell-bound, till the poem was finished.'

'What a pity you did not secure her by a more binding engagement,' sneered Clarice; 'you should have made her Lady Lashmar, and then she would have been always on the spot to read to you and your mother.'

Lady Carminow's womanly instinct understood Lashmar's feelings better than he did himself. She had not been without suspicions upon the subject before to-day. There had been something in his manner of speaking about Stella that indicated hidden fires. And to-day she knew for certain that he had fallen in love with the creature, was under the very same unholy influence that had bewitched Nestorius, the charm of a pale, strange loveliness, and eyes of dark, unfathomable depth.

Lashmar reddened angrily, but refrained from speech.

'Why didn't you consult a clairvoyant?' drawled Mrs. Vavasour. 'You would only have to take a bit of one of the young woman's frocks to a good clairvoyant and he or she would be able to tell you where this young person is and all about her.'

'Unhappily I have not any good clairvoyant in my visiting book,' answered Lashmar curtly.

'Oh, but there must be one in Brumm; there are always clairvoyants everywhere. Instead of going about that great straggling place with a stupid detective you should have found a clairvoyant, and had her—the best are always women—put into a mesmeric trance.'

'There may be something in your idea, Mrs. Vavasour,' Lashmar replied more amiably. 'I'll go over to Brumm this afternoon, and hunt for some modern Witch of Endor. If I am imposed upon, it will be only so much time wasted. Nothing could have been more hopeless than my exploration with the detective.'

'I cannot help being amused at your simplicity in supposing that this young person has gone no further than the nearest town,' exclaimed Clarice, with open scorn. 'Is it not much more likely that she is in London or Paris?'

'If you will take the trouble to comprehend that she had absolutely no money when she left the Castle——' began Lashmar angrily.

'But I cannot comprehend that. She may have had no money from you, or from her ladyship; but is it so certain that she could not get money from some one else? I am sure, judging by Mr. Nestorius's air when those two were walking in the park together at dusk the other evening, if she had said "Lend me fifty pounds," he would have rushed to his cheque-book that instant.'

'I do not think—little as I know of her—that she would ask Mr. Nestorius for fifty pounds, or for five pounds.'

Yet the suggestion startled him, remembering that little scene on the terrace, which implied some very warm feeling, such as grateful affection,

for instance, on Stella's part. Perhaps she had taken a gift of money from Mr. Nestorius in order to flee away from a hateful bondage.

'Whatever evil thing she has done, or whatever harm may happen to her, it all must lie at our door,' he thought, meaning himself and his mother.

Lady Lashmar had not appeared that day. She was much troubled by Stella's flight, and sorely missed her quiet ministrations; but she was troubled far more by the way in which Victorian had taken the event. Why should he be so grieved, so angry? He, who had affected to despise and dislike his dead brother's *protégée*.

That suggestion about the mesmerist came from a very foolish person, and was, doubtless, utterly foolish in itself; but Lashmar had fretted himself into a mood in which he felt that he must be doing something, no matter what, by way of hunting after the missing girl. Yes, he would go and find out a clairvoyant, if there were indeed such a person to be found in Brumm. Natural means having failed, he would try the supernatural. He ordered his phaeton, and then went off in quest of that scrap of raiment or personal belonging which Mrs. Vavasour had told him would be necessary to bring the seer *en rapport* with the subject of her search.

Thinking over the past, that long-ago period of his half-brother's death and his own sudden elevation from the playing fields of Eton to the ownership of Lashmar and all its belongings, he remembered the orphan girl's dangerous illness and Betty's devotion to her. He had seen Betty about the house from time to time, and her appearance had always recalled that tower room and a conversation between him and his mother one stormy afternoon, while the child lay in the

inner chamber, ill of brain fever. Recalling that conversation now, he remembered his own hardness, his utter want of sympathy with that young life—his powerlessness to comprehend the greatness of her loss. He had urged his mother to send her to some orphanage or charity school, he remembered; and it had seemed to him that it would be sufficient for her to be well fed and decently clad in some school uniform, and taught the humblest drudgery, by which she might earn her bread when she came to womanhood.

Yes, he had been hard, unsympathetic, cruel, with the inherent cruelty of selfish boyhood. How different from that tender nature of his brother's, which he had once despised and which he now began to admire.

He went to the corridor outside her ladyship's rooms, and knocked at the door of that small apartment which was sacred to Barker.

'I want to see your niece, Barker; the young woman who used to look after Stella.'

Betty was sent for, and appeared with swollen eyelids and all the traces of a night of tears.

'What have you been crying about?' asked his lordship sternly.

'I could not help it, my lord; it was such a blow. If she should have drowned herself——'

'Drowned herself!' cried Lashmar, in an awful voice. 'How dare you say such a thing?'

Drowned herself! His heart seemed to stop beating at the thought of such a calamity. A girl driven from that house by a long series of unkindnesses on his mother's part, sheer brutality on his own side; by cruel speeches and shameful taunts; driven to suicide as the nearest, easiest refuge. The river was so near; and she had so loved the river, had spent so many a summer day upon that tranquil stream! How well he remem-

bered seeing her sitting in the sunshine, a childish little figure, squatting on a Persian rug at the bottom of the punt, while Hubert reclined near her, surrounded with books, lounging through the summer day in studious indolence. Victorian had passed them many a time among the rushes, wandering with his rod, fly-fishing, scorning his brother's repose, wondering at the spooniness of a man who could spend his days in the company of a child and a dog or two.

Drowned herself! He recalled the deadly pallor of her face, the angry light in her eyes as she told him that she was going to 'march.' What if that pale intent look heralded a desperate resolve? And then memory went further back, and recalled the scene of seven years ago, when he had turned her out of the library because she had been rude to Clarice. What a wretch he had been to her from the very beginning! He could respect her now for having repulsed Clarice's velvety caress and soft purring pity. Those childish eyes had seen into the artificiality of the young beauty's character, had not been hoodwinked by sweet false smiles.

Drowned herself! No, he would not think that dark thought. And yet vivid imagination pictured her lying among the rushes, her streaming hair caught and tangled amidst the wild sweet flowers that thrive beside the river, those starry eyes, glazed in death, gazing upward to their kindred stars! Oh, God! if she had done this thing, driven to that wild act by his foul tongue, would he not stand for ever accursed as her murderer—as a fool who had a precious jewel left in his care, and who trampled upon it and flung it away?

'I will have the river dragged to-night,' he

thought, 'secretly, after dark. I'll go out with the men myself. There shall be no talk, no scandal.'

Then, after a hurried turn or two in the corridor, he went back to the spot where he had left Betty, who had been quietly crying and wiping her poor inflamed eyes all the time.

'I want you to give me something that belonged to Miss Boldwood,' he said: 'something she has worn, or was fond of.'

Betty stared at him in blank wonder. What motive could he have in asking such a thing, he who had never shown the slightest kindness to her poor dear?

But Betty came of a race in whom obedience to superiors was an instinct, and she did her best to comply with his lordship's strange demand.

'Perhaps you would like to see her old rooms?' she faltered. 'There's lots of things belonging to her there.'

'Yes, let me see the rooms.'

He ran up to the tower, followed breathlessly by Betty. The rooms had been left undisturbed. Lashmar Castle had never been so full of visitors as to necessitate the occupation of this tower. The sitting-room and bedroom were exactly as they had been in Stella's childhood. Stella's pretty little white-curtained bed stood ghostlike in one corner, and there was Betty's simple pallet in another. There, too, in sitting-room and bedroom were all those toys and ornaments which Hubert had lavished on his adopted daughter: the peacock's feathers, and Indian fans, and Chinese slippers, and ivory chessmen, and the silver casket with its modest collection of trinkets.

'There's been nothing touched since his lordship died,' said Betty.

'You mean that Stella never had any of these things in her possession after my brother's death?' interrogated Lashmar.

'No, my lord. Her ladyship sent her to sleep in the housemaids' dormitory at the other end of the Castle; and this room has been kept locked up ever since. Her ladyship thought the rooms might be wanted some day for visitors, and then there were alterations to be made; but till her ladyship gave fresh orders everything was to be left as it was.'

'But these things belong to Miss Boldwood,' said Lashmar: 'they are her personal property.'

'They were certainly given to her,' replied Betty meekly; 'but with a child of her age of course that doesn't count.'

'But it does count,' muttered Lashmar; 'nobody has the right to break faith with a child. If my brother gave her these things they were hers.'

'It was her ladyship's wish that nothing should be removed from this room,' said Betty, 'and there the things are just as they were left after his lordship's death. I did take upon myself to bring away a few books: she fretted after her books so sadly, poor child, and her books were the only pleasure she had. Such a child to read and such a child to learn I never saw. Night after night she used to sit up, with her poor little ends of candle—the half-burned candles are the under-butler's perquisites, you know, my lord, and he used to give me a few odd bits—poring over her grammars and her dictionaries, till I thought she'd wear her poor eyes out. And at the same time she did all the sewing that was required of her, and never disobeyed the head-housemaid in anything. It was a hard life for such a young creature to lead.'

'Yes, it was too hard a life. Her ladyship

should have sent her to school. This was no place for her,' said Lashmar shortly.

He did not want to impugn his mother's conduct, least of all in the hearing of a servant. And yet he felt there had been cruelty. He recalled that stormy afternoon—the last—the only time he had ever been in this room—and that he himself in hardness had out-Heroded Herod. He had been even more cruel than his mother—had suggested some charitable institution, poor food and coarse raiment, daily toil and the livery of dependence. He had thought anything good enough for that life with which he had no sympathy. It had never entered into his thoughts that this existence, which he would have dealt with offhand, was gifted with exceptional intellect, richly endowed by nature, and of a force to stand against unmerited misfortune. He recalled that tall, willowy form, the perfect carriage of the head, the grace and dignity of every movement. Repression and ill-usage had been powerless to degrade nature's gifts. The girl had grown up a lady in spite of her surroundings. Tyranny had failed to humiliate her.

'No, she has not destroyed herself,' he thought. He would not let himself think so poorly of her. Such a rich young life would not be lightly flung away at the first keen sense of wrong. A girl who had endured years of bondage and risen superior to all repressing influences was not likely to drown herself in a fit of temper.

'Miss Boldwood took a bag away with her,' he said, after a long silence, during which he had been looking idly at those objects which had been the treasures of a happy childhood: the trinkets and playthings and curiosities from far-off lands. 'Do you know what was in it?'

'Only a few of her books, my lord, just those she was fondest of—I miss them off the shelf in her room—and a change of clothes, perhaps—nothing more. It was only a small carpet bag.'

'I should not think her wardrobe was very extensive,' said Lashmar. 'She always wore the same gown.'

'She had just the same as the rest of us, my lord. Three gowns a year—two every-day and one bettermost.'

One bettermost gown! Oh, the pretty vanities of girlhood! To be reduced to this! Oh! shade of Queen Elizabeth, with a hundred gowns in her wardrobe what time grim death snatched her from need of earthly raiment, save one poor garment of woollen! One bettermost black stuff gown in a year, and two for common wear, 'the same as the rest of us,' which meant upper and under housemaids: perhaps the very scullery and vegetable maids had as much in the republic of servitude. No wonder she had fled from such barbarity. No wonder either that she had angled for a rich husband.

'I want you to give me a piece of one of her every-day gowns,' said Lashmar, approaching the subject somewhat awkwardly; 'just a scrap of the stuff, cut off anywhere—a cuff, for instance.'

'Yes,' my lord, answered Betty, as if he had asked for a glass of water.

'You can go and fetch it while I stay here.'

Betty curtseyed and went off to obey.

He was glad to be alone in this tower sitting-room; to be free to walk to and fro and look about him: out of the window yonder, over the elm tree tops towards the blue broad reach of river; or at the bookshelves and dainty contrivances within; the workbaskets, and desk, and picture

books, and the life-size photograph of his dead brother yonder—only the fine intellectual head, looking out of a dark background.

'No wonder she loved him: no wonder she hates me,' he said to himself.

Betty came back with a black merino cuff cut neatly off the sleeve, and pinned in a sheet of note-paper.

'This came off one of her every-day gowns, I suppose, one that she has worn a good deal.'

'Yes, sir, I took it off the oldest of her gowns. The stuff is almost threadbare.'

'That will do.'

He put it in his pocket, wondering what the discreet Betty was thinking behind that serious countenance of hers. The phaeton was at the door when he went down to the hall. He only stopped to inquire if there were any telegrams; and finding no tidings from the suspected Nestorius he drove off at once on his way back to Brumm.

On arriving at that commercial centre, Lord Lashmar went straight to the police-station. Had there been any news of the missing girl since the morning? No, there had been nothing heard of any young person answering to the description. The want of a photograph of the party was mentioned as a stumblingblock. The police-officer seemed to consider it strange and even scandalous that in a Christian land any young woman could have grown up without having been photographed.

Lashmar asked if there were any person professing to be a clairvoyant resident in Brumm.

The sergeant thought not. Clairvoyance was out of date. Mediums and thought readers and gentlemen who wrote upon slates were all the rage now-a-days. There was no call for clairvoyants. There wasn't a living to be made in that line.

Much disgusted at these replies, Lord Lashmar drove off to the hospital, where he saw the head physician. That gentleman was not an enthusiastic believer in mesmerism or any ism of a distinctly unprofessional character. He had heard of no professed mesmerist or clairvoyant in that part of the world of late years, 'and a good job too,' he added bluntly.

Lashmar drove off, still more disgusted: he had expected broader views from the faculty. He had the threadbare black cuff in his breast pocket, just above his heart; but where was the gifted creature who could give him tidings of her who had worn it? Why could not he, who was so intensely troubled by this girl's disappearance, project his mind into space and seek her out wherever she might be? What poor creatures we are, hemmed in for ever by the narrow precincts of actual existence!

There was nothing for him to do but to go back to the Castle, as soon as his horses' mouths had been washed out.

He left the phaeton in the hotel yard and sauntered listlessly along the street, looking at shop windows and window-bills in sheer vacancy of mind; and it was in this condition that he almost ran into his old acquaintance, Mr. Stokes, of Avondale, the family practitioner, who attended Lady Lashmar in all her slighter disorders, and had even been allowed to see her ladyship's only son safely through the regulation diseases of childhood. Stokes was an enthusiastic angler, and he and Victorian had often gone fly-fishing together in the Etonian's summer holidays.

'You are the very person I want to see,' said Stokes. 'I heard of you at the hospital just now, inquiring for a mesmerist. I'd been up there to see one of my parishioners in the surgical

ward: compound fracture—very pretty case; and old Pettifer told me you had been inquiring for a mesmerist. What a very odd game!'

'It isn't a game at all,' answered Lashmar with an irritated air, not at all relishing Stokes's light-mindedness. 'I have a particular reason for wanting to find a mesmerist, and I thought Dr. Pettifer a prejudiced old fool.'

'He is,' answered Stokes pleasantly. 'You were quite right there. I don't know anything about mesmerism now-a-days. We seem to have gone beyond it, somehow. But if a medium can be of any use to you, I think I can introduce you to one of the best in England. I was going to the Lion on the chance of finding you when you very nearly capsized me.'

'How kind of you, Stokes. A medium? You mean spirit-rapping, and that kind of thing?'

'I believe it is something in that way. I have never seen the young lady perform, but I am told she is really wonderful.'

'Is she a public performer—a person who exhibits her supernatural powers for money?'

'Nothing of the kind. She is a young woman who lives with a very eccentric old lady on the outskirts of this town; an old lady who used to live near Avondale, and whom I have known from my boyhood. She was my father's patient, and she is my patient, and she's as mad as a March hare, but perfectly harmless. Her latest craze, taken up nearly twenty years ago, is Spiritualism. She discovered remarkable gifts in a little girl who used to run errands for her dressmaker—a motherless and fatherless waif, of whose actual parentage nobody can give any account. Old Mrs. Minchin was so struck with this child, then about nine years old, that she adopted her, and

the two have been playing the queerest pranks in the spiritualistic line ever since. The old lady is as tough as crocodile's hide, and is likely to live well on into her second century; but I'm afraid the girl is doomed. She is highly hysterical, and slightly epileptic; and I believe she has worn out her young life in calling up spirits for old Mrs. Minchin. If you would like to see her——'

'I should above all things,' interrupted Lashmar.

'I think I can manage it. Have you time to drive as far as Thorleigh?'

Thorleigh was one of the genteel suburbs of Brumm, on the edge of the country. Time indeed? Lashmar felt as if he had time to go to the moon.

He took the doctor back to the hotel, and they both got into the phaeton and drove off to Thorleigh to see what could be done with old Mrs. Minchin, who was not always disposed to be civil or communicative. Her moods were understood to depend on the spirits. When *they* were placable she ran over with amiability.

Lashmar had always ridiculed spiritualistic performances and pretensions of all kinds. For mesmerism or clairvoyance he had a faint, half-hearted belief; but for the floaters in the air, and the rappers on the underside of tables, and the flourishes of spirit hands—generally turning out on investigation to be mortal feet—he had no respect whatever. And yet so weak is humanity, that, impelled as it were by that threadbare cuff in his breast pocket, he burned with impatience to behold and to interrogate Mrs. Minchin's supernaturally endowed *protégée*.

Beyond the modern suburb of Thorleigh, with its smart villas suggestive of retired tradesmen, there was a straggling old village of shabbiest

cottages, and beyond the village there was a bleak stretch of common, and on one side of the common, remote from the high road, and approachable only by a muddy lane, stood the house of Mrs. Minchin.

It was an old and gloomy-looking house, in a large neglected garden, and seemed altogether a fitting tabernacle for wandering spirits to go in and out of. Lashmar and Stokes were shown into the most dismal drawing-room the former had ever seen—a large low room with a faded wall paper and furniture of the ponderous school, just old enough to be hideous, and not old enough to be interesting. There was no fire, and the room smelt of mildew.

Here they waited a quarter of an hour in the hope of at least seeing Mrs. Minchin, if not the medium; but the elderly parlour-maid, who had taken Mr. Stokes's message, reappeared after that lapse of time and informed him that Mrs. Minchin was engaged in a *séance*, and could not see any one that evening.

'It was almost as much as my place was worth to knock at her door with your message,' she told the doctor, 'but I was anxious to oblige you. She will see Lord Lashmar to-morrow afternoon at four o'clock, if he would like to call.'

Lashmar begged the servant to tell Mrs. Minchin that he would wait upon her at four o'clock precisely; but that if she could find it in her heart to receive him sooner a telegram to that effect would add to his sense of obligation.

'And you can tell your mistress that his lordship is a staunch believer,' added Stokes.

'Nothing would induce her to see him if she didn't think that,' answered the servant. 'We all have to be believers here.'

'What, the cook and all?' asked Lashmar, tickled in spite of himself at the idea of a household of spiritualists.

'Oh, yes, my lord, cook's a believer. But cooking don't count for much in this house, and no cook would stay here that wanted to keep her hand in. I don't think missus ever knows what she is eating.'

There was no more to be done. Lord Lashmar left his card—which would have been a thing of beauty and a joy for ever to any householder in those smart villas yonder, but which was as nought to a lady who had intimate relations with far more distinguished members of the peerage: to wit, Lord Bacon, Lord Byron, and Lord Brougham, with the last of whom she had held long conversations as to his conduct in the famous Caroline trial, while the poet had apologised to her for the unholier passages of his 'Don Juan,' and the philosopher had communicated newly developed theories which went far beyond anything in his published works.

Lashmar drove Mr. Stokes back to Avondale through the autumn dusk, amidst odours of damp fallen leaves, newly upturned earth, and weed burning.

'How is your poor brother's *protégée*, the little maid I attended through a bad attack of brain fever?' asked Stokes by-and-by, for the sake of conversation. 'I was surprised to see what a fine-grown young woman she had become, when I met her in the park the other day.'

Lashmar felt glad that his countenance was hidden by the shades of night as he answered:

'Well, the fact is we are in some trouble about her. She has chosen to leave us abruptly, without explanation or apology; and—and—we

are infernally anxious about her,' added Lashmar, forgetting himself.

'Oh, but I don't see why you should be anxious. If she has acted ungratefully that is her look out. I suppose she has gone to some situation that she likes better. Girls are so frivolous. But I am disappointed in her; for I always thought her a head and shoulders above the common type of girl.'

CHAPTER XIX

'IT MEANS THAT I AM A BRUTE'

Mr. Nestorius's telegram was in the hall when Lord Lashmar returned to the Castle, and Nestorius himself arrived at half-past nine o'clock next morning, startling the select few who remained after the shooters had gone off to their sport. Neither Lady Carminow nor Mrs. Vavasour appeared at this early meal, and Lady Sophia always accompanied the shooters when there was no hunting; so the select few on this occasion consisted of Lord Lashmar, Mrs. Mulciber, and Captain Vavasour, who had stayed at home to work at a new novel in which all his *dramatis personæ* were gradually coming to life at an average of eleven descriptive pages for every character.

On these burst Nestorius, haggard and pallid after a sleepless night in the Scotch mail.

'Have you found her?' he asked agitatedly.

'No, nor any tidings of her,' answered Lashmar,

rising. 'If you will come to the library I will tell you what I have been doing.'

Mrs. Mulciber looked deeply disappointed. She liked to have her finger in every family pie, and she thought she knew a good deal more about Mr. Nestorius's feelings for the missing girl than anybody else in the Castle. She was eager to comfort and give advice, to make the statesman her own in his hour of trouble, just as she had so impounded many other important personages; but here was Lashmar carrying off her prey.

She started up from her chair, and moved quickly to the door, as if to cut off Nestorius's retreat.

'If I can be of any use,' she cooed softly: 'Stella and I were great friends. I don't think there is any one else in this house in whom she confided as freely.'

Nestorius fixed her with his keen grey eyes.

'Do you know where she has gone, or why she went?' he asked decisively.

Mrs. Mulciber hesitated, preparing a diplomatic answer.

'You don't,' said Nestorius, answering for her; 'then you can't help us,' and he followed Lord Lashmar out of the room.

'I could at least have advised them,' murmured Mrs. Mulciber, going back to her breakfast. 'It has been my fate to see so much of the side-scenes of life.'

'You must have had the most interesting experiences,' said Vavasour, finishing off a grouse. 'Let us make ourselves comfortable while those two fools fuss and twaddle about that dark-eyed girl, with whom I believe they are both in love. And I take it she has run away in order to bring one or other of 'em to the point. I want you to tell me all the little details of Lady Banbury's elopement. It is just one of those stories that a touch-and-go

novelist can work upon: and the details are everything. Imagination can give the broad lines of a story, but it is hard fact to which one must go for details—the one touch of nature, don't you know?—like that story of the lady at Brighton, who, after she had just left her husband's house to bolt with her lover, leaving the door open behind her, faltered, and turned in a fit of remorse, and would have gone back—only the wind blew the door, and it shut in her face. Dramatic, wasn't it? Yet a novelist would hardly have invented the blowing to of the door.'

'Why, in heaven's name, did she leave this house?' exclaimed Nestorius, alone with Lashmar in the library. 'What made her do such a thing? She seemed to me tolerably contented with her fate—resigned to live on as she was living, till her literary talent found an opening and gave her independence; and yet, within a few hours of my leaving her, she rushes away as if she were driven by the Furies. What can it mean?'

'It means that I am a brute,' answered Lashmar, standing before Nestorius with downcast brow and a dogged air; 'yes, a brute. I have always been a brute to that girl, from the hour when my poor brother first brought her into this house to the hour she left it, driven out of it by my foul tongue. You do well to talk of the Furies. That girl has been my Nemesis. She has brought the sin of pride of birth, the overweening confidence in caste, home to me. She has made me feel what a poor worm I am, and that in gentlemanly feeling I rank lower than the lowest iron-worker in Brumm. I set my face against her from the first; I was resolved to see nothing but evil in her; I was hard, cold, cruel, pitiless, saw her youth blighted by hard usage and

never entered one plea in her behalf. And then when I came back to the Castle the other day and saw her grown to graceful womanhood, saw her strange and spiritual beauty, I was angry with myself for admiring her, I was angry with her for being so superior to her station, for giving the lie to all my prejudices. The more I found myself yielding to the spell of her mystical beauty the more I set myself against her, wrestling with the inclination to see more of her, tearing myself from the room when she was reading to my mother, shunning her at all times and in all places as if she had breathed infection. And yet I could not pluck her from my heart; and her image haunted me; and I started up out of my sleep fancying that her voice was in my ears, those deep, low tones which gave new melodies to Keats and Milton. I hated myself for falsifying every principle of my life, which was to see perfection only in the well born; and every grace that attracted me to her was an offence against my pride, and made me more resentful of her existence. It was in this mood that I watched you and her the night before last from yonder window. I saw her throw herself at your feet and kiss your hand, and I was mad with rage at the spectacle. I accused her of trying to entrap you with an offer—playing for high stakes!'

'You accused her of trying to entrap me!' cried Nestorius. 'Did you do that, Lashmar? How wise and far-seeing you young men are! What if I tell you that I had just asked her to be my wife, asked her with as earnest entreaty as ever man made to the woman of his choice? I had so asked her, and she had refused me. It was friendship, gratitude, which she offered me on her knee—all unworthy as I am. Love she could not give me.'

'She refused to marry you—she, my mother's slave!'

'Yes; it is strange, is it not? She has not seen enough of the world to have learnt how to sell herself to the highest bidder. She has curious primitive notions that a woman can only give herself in marriage to the man she loves; and she does not love me.'

'She is a strange being,' murmured Lashmar, walking to the nearest window, and staring out into the garden, with his face averted from Nestorius.

He had taunted her as an adventuress and a husband huntress. This right-minded, resolute creature, who had refused the utmost promotion to which a girl in her position could aspire, a rich indulgent husband, highly placed, famous, having all qualities calculated to charm women, except youth —why had she so flung away high fortune, why refused such a helpmate? Simply because she did not love him. Was her young heart a blank then, or was there any one else? Yet who else could there be for her who had lived like a bird in a cage—who had never, since his brother's death, been in the society of any men of refinement except Nestorius and old Verner? There could be no one else: her heart must be still unawakened to the mystery of woman's love.

'You are very merciful in your silence,' he said after a long pause, returning to the front of the fireplace where Nestorius was standing. 'But no upbraiding you could bestow upon me could intensify my sense of my brutal folly. I was like a child destroying a butterfly in wanton rage at its beauty. If she were here I would ask her pardon on my knees. I have been miserable from the hour of her flight—the abject slave of remorse. All kinds of horrors have presented themselves to my mind—even the idea of suicide—that she

might have rushed down to the river and flung herself in——'

'No, no,' interrupted Nestorius quickly; 'I have no fear of such sinful folly. Her mind is too well balanced, and she has that inner consciousness of genius which is almost as an armour against the arrows of Fate. Her dominant idea was that she would be able to support herself by literature, to pour out her wealth of thought and fancy in fiction. She had her day dream of a cottage near the Avon, with an old nurse of hers for housekeeper and companion. She had a scheme for the future, and in leaving this house you may be sure she went with the intention of working out her own destiny in that manner. I am not afraid of any folly on her part. My only fear is for the dangers to which her absolute inexperience of the world might expose her.'

'She was penniless,' said Lashmar, 'unless—as Lady Carminow suggested—she had borrowed money from you.'

'Did Lady Carminow make that suggestion? How like Lady Carminow! No, she had no money from me, poor child!'

'You say she has literary aspirations,' said Lashmar; 'and you imply that she has talent for writing.'

'She has more than talent, Lashmar. She has genius—original genius, rarest gift in these days of imitative art. She has genius as original and as unique as that of Charlotte Brontë, the untutored child of those lonely Yorkshire moors you and I know so well. But I will not ask you to believe this upon my assertion. You shall judge for yourself; if you will allow me to ask for my letters here.'

Lashmar rang the bell, and Mr. Nestorius's

letters were brought, among them a packet of printer's proofs, which Nestorius opened, unrolled and arranged in sequence with the deftness of hands accustomed to dealing with proofs.

'Read for yourself,' he said, 'when you have an hour's leisure: that is the beginning of Stella's story; I read the whole of it in manuscript.'

'What can she write about, she who has seen nothing of the world?'

'Blind John Milton had never seen hell, and John Keats had never seen a Titan; and yet they contrived to write about such things with very fair effect,' answered Nestorius.

'It seems then that she confided all her plans and aspirations to you—her manuscripts even. You were privileged in receiving so much of her confidence.'

'I am her tutor's old friend, and she knew that I sympathised with her. Those two facts brought us at once *en rapport*. Well, now, Lashmar, what have you done towards finding her?'

Lord Lashmar gave a detailed account of his efforts in Brumm. He blushed like a girl when he came to the story of his hunt for a clairvoyant, and his call upon Mrs. Minchin. 'It was utter foolishness of course, inspired by a silly woman.'

'Yes, no doubt it is all foolishness,' answered Nestorius thoughtfully; 'and yet how we all hanker after it, that mysterious something, beyond the border-line of hard fact. But our aspirations after the supernatural have been vulgarised by modern charlatans, until it is hardly possible to define the distinction between the conjuror and the sibyl. I'll go with you to the sibyl this afternoon, if you like—*pour passer le temps*—after we have seen the police and heard what they have done for

us. And now I am off to my old friend Verner, who may be in Stella's confidence.'

'He was not on the night she ran away. I went to him soon after we missed her.'

'He may have heard from her since.'

'If he has he ought to have let me know,' answered Lashmar hotly. 'He must have seen how distressed I was about her disappearance.'

'Your distress must have surprised him very much if he did see it,' said Nestorius, with a touch of scorn; 'for I do not think he had an exaggerated idea of his pupil's importance in this house.'

'Had you not better breakfast before you go out again?' asked Lashmar.

'Thanks, no, I had a kind of breakfast at the station; I'll see Verner, and then come back for a bath before luncheon. They tell me I am to have my old rooms again.'

'Of course; there has been no new guest worthy to occupy them.'

Nestorius mused somewhat sadly upon his interview with Lashmar as he walked across the park in the blustery autumn morning. What a fitful, selfish, masterful spirit young love seemed to the man of mature years, who loved with an unselfish tenderness and capacity of self-sacrifice unknown to youth. And so it was love, after all—dominant, unconquerable love—which had impelled Lashmar to bitter speeches and affected scorn. He too had felt the strange witchery of that bright creature's personality, had been conquered and had struggled against the victor.

'Did she care for him all the time?' Nestorius asked himself. 'Was it for his sake she refused me—was it for love of him she was cold and deaf to my prayers? I pressed her hard, tried

to fathom the depths of heart and mind, but could discover no secret lurking there. Womanly pride is so close an armour.'

And then, after long musing—

'Yes, she loves him. It was that which made the sting of his insolence so sharp. She loves him—caught by that young grace of his, the darkly handsome face, with its strong lines and eagle glance, the pride of youth and strength, and undisciplined power; the radiance of a young spirit that has never known Fate's reverses. Yes, she loves him. It was his image that kept her young heart sealed against me. He stands at the door and keeps me out. Middle age has no charms. She would reverence gray hairs—perhaps deem it an act of duty and devotion to give up her life to an old man: but I, the hard, active man of the world, can have no claim upon her affection, no sway over her imagination. I stand without the pale.'

He found Gabriel Verner with an open letter before him, brought by that morning's post.

It was from Stella. There was no address, but the postmark was Brussels.

'*You* may see this letter, for it contains a message for you,' said Verner, after he and Nestorius had exchanged a few friendly words, the old man much surprised at the statesman's return. 'It is for your eye, but no other. Be sure you do not mention it to Lord Lashmar.'

'Certainly not, if she desires otherwise.'

'You will see.'

Nestorius read the letter, in the fine clear hand he knew so well from the girl's manuscripts. She had always striven to make her stories look as attractive as neat penmanship could make them. The idea that they would ever take the still

more attractive form of print had seemed so remote a hope. And in this wise she had cultivated writing as a fine art.

'Do not be unhappy about me, dear friend and master,' she wrote. 'I have done that which is best for my own happiness. My life at Lashmar has been a very hard one ever since my benefactor's death, and something occurred yesterday to make it unbearable. I could not stay in that house another hour.

'Providence has been very good to me, and I have found new friends and a new home with kind honest people, a home in which I can work at literature until I am able to win my independence. Directly *that* is won I shall come back to you, and carry out the dream of my life, which is to have a cottage and a pretty garden by the river you and I love so well—the river by which I spent so many happy days in my childhood, and which always recalls the memory of the dear friend I lost.

'Please tell Mr. Nestorius that I thank him with all my heart for his goodness to me, and that I am happy to leave the fate of my first book in his hands. If he who has such experience in literature will correct the proofs of my story, it will be one more favour for which I shall be deeply grateful. If the book should be a failure I shall be more sorry upon that kind friend's account than upon my own.

'God bless you, dear friend, and be sure that absence will not lessen my affection for the teacher to whom I owe so much more than my loving care can ever repay. But I look forward to the hope of having you by-and-by for my abiding guest in Dreamland Cottage.

'Don't you think that would be rather a good

name for my house, if ever I am happy enough to own one?

'Your ever grateful pupil,

'STELLA.

'P.S.—On no account let any one at the Castle—except Mr. Nestorius—know that you have heard from me.'

'Thank God she has not fallen among thieves,' said Nestorius, when he had read this letter. And yet in the next moment his heart sank within him as he asked himself whether any girl so utterly inexperienced as Stella could be trusted to discriminate between fair and foul? Whether these new friends of homely class, found with such strange facility, might not be wolves in sheep's clothing? Her youth and beauty and ignorance of the world's ways were so many sources of peril. What if the kind homely soul who had so readily extended a sheltering wing, were some matron of the order cheerily indicated by the honourable Tom Shuffleton, when he offers a haven for poor Mary. Nestorius's blood ran cold at the thought of the pitfalls that gape for unwary feet in such a city as Brumm. And yet again he told himself that there is a semi-divine instinct, which warns purity against contact with the impure—an instinct finer than worldly knowledge, a shred of that cast-off robe of glory which the spirit once wore in the world from whence it came. Stella's keen intellect and vivid imagination would serve her instead of the knowledge of unholy things. The demon of impurity would betray his loathsome presence in a glance or a tone, and she would flee from the Destroyer as from a fiery furnace. God so guards the spirits of the pure; and Una riding her lion is but the type of a lofty soul passing scatheless through the habitations of evil.

Notwithstanding which comforting belief Mr. Nestorius made up his mind that he would hunt every street in Brumm until he had found Stella and her new friends. The mind of such a man is like a grand organ with a double set of keys. There is the keyboard of the enthusiast and believer, the keyboard of the sceptic and matter-of-fact man of business. It was by his power of playing on both these two keyboards with equal skill that Mr. Nestorius had been able to influence society of every grade and men of every temper.

He went back to the Castle and got rid of the grime and dust of a long railway journey, and issued forth from his dressing-room refreshed and rejuvenated, but he did not stay to luncheon. He left a little note for Lord Lashmar to the effect that he had an appointment in Brumm, and that he would meet him at half-past three in the coffee-room of the Lion and Lamb, when they would go together to the cave of the sibyl.

Having thus stolen a march upon Lashmar, and left himself free to pursue his inquiries unhelped and unhindered, Mr. Nestorius hired a fly in the village and drove to Brumm, where he first took a hasty luncheon, and then did three or four hours' private detective work on his own account, exploring street after street, inquiring closely in all manner of shabby respectable neighbourhoods where such a girl as Stella might naturally seek for an inexpensive lodging; visiting the Free Library and interrogating the librarians; strolling in that dreary pleasure-ground known as the People's Park; but by a strange fatality avoiding just that one long narrow street on the way to the cemetery, and that one particular chandler's shop in which the Chapmans had their dwelling-place.

He was weary, disheartened, and altogether dis-

gusted with himself at half-past four o'clock when, punctual to the very minute, he entered the hotel coffee-room and found Lashmar drooping despondently over a local newspaper.

The police had been able to tell him nothing. It was as if the earth had opened and swallowed the girl for whom they were searching.

'She must have gone to London,' said Lashmar: 'that is the only place in which any one could so completely vanish from human ken.'

Nestorius knew she had not gone to London, but he held his p ace.

They wer alone in the coffee-room, where there was no fire, and where the newly lighted gas was singing a dismal chorus.

'I have been reading her story,' said Lashmar. 'It is delightful—so new, so powerful—altogether fresh, and simple, and fervent and true. To think that Boldwood's daughter should be a genius, and that kind of genius! Not a vehement partisan of Radical politicians, a shrieking claimant for woman's rights; but a poet, a dreamer, a weaver of fancy's most enthralling web. How she will scorn us and the cage in which we kept her! How she will laugh at her tyrants when she has burst upon the world in all the charm of her originality, and has won thousands for her friends! Such a book *must* make a hit.'

'That was what the publisher's reader told me,' answered Nestorius quietly. 'Publishers' readers are sometimes wrong: three or four of the tribe rejected Miss Brontë's "Jane Eyre," and it is said that "Vanity Fair" went a-begging: but this gentleman was very positive. "Take my word for it this book will go," he said. "It has all the fire and freshness of youth, and all the grace of a highly cultivated style. The writer must have fed her fancy with the very finest order of intellectual food. There is no

taint of garbage from the first page to the last." Knowing how Stella had been trained by your brother and poor old Verner, I thought this criticism argued some power of judgment on the part of the publisher's reader.'

'Yes, she has been fed on the best food. I have laughed at seeing her poring over Homer or Virgil. My mother told me that girl knew Milton better than anyone she ever met except John Bright, and that she had Shelley and Keats interwoven in her memory. She has an extraordinary power of memory, my mother says, and a fine ear for melodious combinations of words. Perhaps she has something to thank her Ladyship for in her two years' drudgery as a reader. My mother never cared for inferior writers, and the mill in which Stella worked ground only the finest corn.'

'Fate weaves in a loom whose mechanism we know not,' answered Nestorius gravely. 'The education of submission may have been the best education for genius; but it was not a joyous experience.'

'No, she has been badly treated. Do you think I shall deny that after my free confession this morning?' asked Lashmar bitterly.

'I think you are full of generous instincts—marred by perverted pride,' answered Nestorious, with his unflinching air. 'I think you have treated this girl abominably; I think you have made her suffer damnably; and that by way of revenge she will make you the noblest wife an English gentleman need ever hope to win for himself.'

'You think she will ever be brought to forgive me?' faltered Lashmar excitedly.

'I think you are both passionately in love

with each other, and that it needs but one look and one word from you to heal every wound you ever inflicted upon that pure and generous heart.'

'Oh! it is you who are generous, it is only you who are noble,' cried Lashmar.

'I have lived twenty years longer than you, and I have learnt one of the lessons that time teaches,' answered Nestorius gravely. 'I have learnt the wisdom of renunciation. Not another word, Lashmar. I am too old for sentiment. Let us go and interview this witch of yours, and see if she can enlighten us.'

CHAPTER XX

'I GO TO GATHER THIS THE SACRED KNOWLEDGE'

LASHMAR had his phaeton at the door, and they drove off to Thorleigh common and the muddy accommodation lane which led to Mrs. Minchin's dreary abode: a house built in the reign of George the Fourth, square, unpicturesque, flat and uninteresting, such a house as the small country squire of that unæsthetic epoch deemed all sufficient for comfort and delight. It was one of those houses of which even the house-agent could say nothing better than that it was roomy.

They were shown into the dismal drawing-room. Again no fire. It was natural that the spirits should be indifferent to atmosphere, but Mrs. Minchin must surely have suffered as a mortal, if ever she sat in that damp and chilly apartment.

They waited about ten minutes, which seemed fifty to Lashmar's impatience, and then the door opened—Lashmar starting at the sound as if it had been the veil of the temple rent in twain, so highly strung were his nerves—and two rather commonplace-looking ladies entered the room. The first was a little old woman in a skimpy black silk gown, a sort of gown which such old ladies wear from year's end to year's end till it drops to pieces; a little old woman with a narrow pinched little face, and watery eyes

with red rims to them, and a sharp nose. The second was a girl of middle height, very fair, with insipid flaxen hair, dull and dead looking as tow, and the most expressionless countenance Lashmar had ever seen. It had no more meaning than a log. If this was the mortal with whom spirits loved to hold commune, they had indeed strange predilections.

Lord Lashmar introduced himself, and then Mr. Nestorius. At that distinguished name the little old lady brightened, and became slightly flustered: but the name evolved no ray of intelligence in the wooden visage of the girl.

'I hope your lordship's distinguished friend does not come here to scoff,' said Mrs. Minchin, looking at the distinguished friend, and not at Lashmar.

Mr. Nestorius explained that there was nothing further from his thoughts than scoffing. He was a man open to all impressions, an earnest inquirer into all creeds. If the spirits revealed themselves they would find him sympathetic.

'You look it,' said the old lady, gazing up at him admiringly. 'I can see faith and enthusiasm in your face. Begin, Griselda, begin,' she added, with an excitable air.

'Your young friend's name is Griselda?' asked Nestorius.

'Her real name is Sarah Anne Curtis,' replied Mrs. Minchin. 'Griselda is the name the spirits gave her when she first came to live with me. I think it must have been chosen because of her patience in waiting for hours in silence and contemplation. It is the name by which she is known in the spirit world.'

Nestorius and Lashmar were both gazing earnestly at the young lady so baptised. It taxed their faith considerably to be told there could be sympathy and communion between this stolid-looking creature and the world of disembodied souls. Never did any human countenance seem more of the earth earthy.

'Have you been long in communication with the spirit world?' asked Lashmar.

A slight but curious twitching disturbed the wooden composure of Griselda's face as she replied, like a faint reminiscence of St. Vitus.

Griselda told them how the spirits of the dead had been her frequent visitants from the time she came to live with Mrs. Minchin; how they had held converse with her, and had revealed secrets which she dared not impart to mortal ear. She trembled visibly as she spoke of those revelations, and the twitchings about her pale, expressionless eyes became more marked.

'In all these spirit communications have you ever received any message of practical value?' asked Nestorius; but this question seemed outside Griselda's power of apprehension. She only stared blankly at the inquirer.

'Those communications are not to be measured by the common standard,' said Mrs. Minchin tartly. 'If you mean to ask whether the spirits have ever named the winner of the Derby, or prophesied a rise in railway shares, no—decidedly no; and I should cease to believe in them if they lowered themselves by any such paltering with grosser things.'

'Then I fear the spirits will not be able to help me,' said Lashmar. 'I am troubled by the disappearance of some one who is very dear to me. Do you think the spirits will tell me how to find her?'

'Try the slate, Griselda,' said Mrs. Minchin, and the medium silently proceeded to obey.

First she drew forward an old-fashioned Pembroke table, covered with a green cloth of particularly Philistine pattern. She took off the cloth and put up the flaps of the table, leaving all clear beneath. Then from another part of the room she brought two or[illegible]y school slates, a small basin of water and a sp[illegible], and carefully washed both slates before the eyes of Lashmar and Nestorius, who watched as intently as if this slate-washing had been the most delicate of surgical operations.

When the slates had been dried, Griselda allowed the neophytes to examine them while she produced a crayon box containing some odd bits of slate pencil, about the third of an inch long.

'Will the spirits write upon the slate with one of these pencils?' asked Nestorius.

'Yes, a spirit will write. You can choose a piece of pencil.'

'Thanks; may I mark it?'

'Certainly.'

Nestorius took out his pen-knife and notched an N upon the butt-end of the pencil.

The girl placed four chairs round the table. Then she put one slate on the top of the other, with the marked pencil lying in the hollow space between the two frames. Then Mrs. Minchin, Nestorius, Lashmar and Griselda sat round the table, holding each others' hands, the medium giving Lashmar her left hand while with her right she held the slate under the table, her right thumb showing above the table.

Griselda then told Lashmar to ask a question.

'Have you the power to answer my question?' he asked.

There was no reply. It seemed as if the spirits were offended at the sceptical tone of the inquiry.

They waited for some time in silence, and then the medium suggested that Lashmar and Nestorius should change places; whereupon Nestorius placed himself next the medium, and held her hand in his.

Two minutes afterwards they heard a violent scratching on the slate. When they looked at it there appeared the following words:—

'Between great minds in all worlds there is communion.—Nelly.'

The left hand of the medium had been held in that of Nestorius all the time; the thumb of her right hand was visible on the table. It was—or seemed to be—impossible that the hand so engaged could have written on the slate.

The message was flattering to Nestorius, but somewhat futile. The signature had a frivolous air, which repelled Lashmar.

'Who is Nelly?' he asked discontentedly.

'She is one of my guides,' answered Griselda gravely. 'The spirits are here, and will answer. Ask what you will. You can write your question on a slate if you like, and no one here need know what you ask.'

She gave Lashmar another pencil out of her crayon box, and, unseen by the rest, he wrote his question on one of the slates.

'Is it necessary that the slates should be underneath the table?' asked Nestorius. 'Could they not be held above it?'

'Yes,' answered Griselda; 'above the table if you like.'

At her direction they all stood up in a circle and held the double slate above the table. For some minutes there was silence; then there came the scratching sound as before, and Lashmar felt the vibration of the slate as the pencil travelled along it. Then came three sharp taps with the pencil, signifying that the message was finished.

Lashmar turned the slate with feverish eagerness. The spirit message was written in a corner, the writing the reverse way of the medium's position. If she had written those characters, she had written them upside-down; but it seemed to Lashmar and Nestorius impossible that she could have written them. Standing as they all stood, holding the slate above the table, it seemed beyond the power of the cleverest prestigiator who ever lived to produce that writing, or direct that pencil.

'Look for her among the dead!'

That was the message. Lashmar turned white and sick as he read. Conjuring, trickery, parlour-magic, sham of whatever order the thing might be, his heart sank within him at a reply which seemed the fulfilment of his darkest fears.

He held the slate towards Nestorius, pointing to the words with tremulous finger, and the statesman's pale cheek blanched a little as he deciphered them.

'Have you any other question to ask?' inquired Griselda, with an exhausted air, while Mrs. Minchin looked on rapturously, proud of the effect the spirits had produced.

'No, I will ask no more,' said Lashmar. 'It is holding communion with the devil.'

And then he faltered a hasty expression of gratitude to Mrs. Minchin, looked with undisguised horror at the wooden-faced medium, bowed hastily to both and hurried out of the room.

'Don't be frightened or disheartened,' said Nestorius, when they were in the hall, waiting for his lordship's phaeton to drive up to the porch, 'there may be nothing in it—a mere clever trick, perhaps, which we are not able to discover.'

'Trick or no trick, it is diabolical,' muttered Lashmar. 'How came that devilish pencil to put my worst fear into words—a fear I have hardly

acknowledged to myself? Such things must come from direct traffic with Satan. I begin to think our ancestors were not such fools as we take them to have been when they burnt witches. And as for Urbain Grandier, I dare say he thoroughly deserved the stake.'

CHAPTER XXI

'THE PAST IS PAST, AND I AM COME TO THEE'

'LOOK for her among the dead!' Those words haunted Lashmar like the cry of the Banshee. They kept repeating themselves in his ear all through that seemingly eternal evening as he sat at dinner, and heard the frivolous babble of his guests around him, as meaningless as the prattle of a streamlet over its pebbly bed, and later in the drawing-room, where Lady Carminow played nocturne and mazurka, polonaise and waltz, with untiring persistence, expatiating meanwhile on the merits of a new Hungarian composer to a knot of admirers clustered round the piano.

'So wild, so pathetic,' said one.

'Yes, there is a kind of subtle, undeveloped melody,' added Captain Vavasour.

'Yes, it is undeveloped music,' agreed Mrs. Mulciber. 'That is just the word. A melody hinted at rather than expressed.'

'It seems to my uneducated ear as if the man had always been trying to hit upon a tune and

had never succeeded,' remarked Lady Sophia bluntly.

'I am afraid, Lady Sophia, that neither you nor I are educated up to the subtle gradations of modern music,' said Nestorius, leaving the piano. 'The touch is too delicate for us—the shades too fine. We want the bolder colouring of the old masters, Mozart, for instance. There is never any mistake as to what he means.'

Lashmar turned his back upon that group by the grand piano, and moved restlessly about among the furniture, now taking up a book from the table, only to throw it down again unopened; now standing with his hands in his pockets, staring idly at a vase of Parma violets, or a bowl of late roses. At last the babble grew intolerable to him, and he went off to his mother's room.

He had not seen her since the morning. He had been with her for a few minutes before breakfast, and had found her very low and nervous, too ill to appear among her guests.

'If I feel equal to the exertion I shall go down to dinner,' she had said; but the dinner hour had come and with it a message from her ladyship excusing herself.

Lashmar found his mother sitting by the fire in her morning room, with her book-table and reading-lamp beside her, but with no appearance of having been reading. She was seated in a despondent attitude, gazing dreamily into the fire. She started at her son's entrance.

'Well, have you heard of her?' she said at once.

'Not a word. She has disappeared utterly. Both Nestorius and I have hunted for her all through Brumm. The police can do nothing to help us.'

'Then I suppose we must resign ourselves to the

idea that she has gone for ever,' said her ladyship. 'She has been very ungrateful.'

'Oh, mother, what cause had she for gratitude—except to my brother? What kindness have you or I ever shown her?'

'We have given her such a home as she could have had nowhere else. We have given her the opportunity to educate herself to the highest point. But for our kindness she would have had to earn her bread by the sweat of her brow. She must have been a domestic servant or a factory girl.'

'She would never have remained a servant or a factory girl. She is a genius, mother.'

And then Lord Lashmar told his mother about the proofs that he had read, and of Nestorius's and the publisher's praise.

'What then?' asked her ladyship. 'That book is the fruit of refined surroundings, of years of elegant leisure. Do you suppose that in service her genius—if you please to term it genius—could ever have been developed? Do you think there are no gifts strangled and blighted by adverse circumstances—no great intellects among servants and factory girls? I tell you she had the strongest reasons for gratitude—and yet knowing herself useful, almost invaluable to me—to me a sick woman, she leaves me without compunction, without a word of regret.'

'Then you do miss her, mother; you are fond of her,' exclaimed Lashmar, with flushed cheeks and brightening eyes.

The dowager looked up from the fire for the first time, and scrutinised her son keenly.

'Fond is too strong a word,' she said: 'I like my servants; I become attached to them even when they are useful and faithful; but I am never fond of them.'

'But she is not a servant; she is gently born, has been highly educated, is gifted far above other women. Oh, mother, be human if you can. You know this girl has crept into your heart, however hardly you may have striven to keep her out. You know that you miss her sorely, that she has grown dear to you.'

'Necessary to me, perhaps, Victorian, but not dear.'

'Yes, she has become dear to you,' pleaded Lashmar, kneeling by his mother's chair, throwing his arm round her as he had done many a time in his boyish days when he wanted some indulgence at her hands, but as he had done rarely of late years. 'Yes, mother, say dear to you—for my sake.'

'For your sake, Victorian! What can you mean?'

'For my sake, mother; yes, for my sake. This friendless waif, this orphan daughter of a demagogue and destructive, this spawn of the radical gutter is just the one woman I will have for my wife. It may be that I shall not win her—I who have done everything to make myself hateful in her eyes; but if I miss her, I will have none other. I will go down to my grave a woman hater. Yes, the hater and reviler of such women as Lady Carminow, beneath whose alabaster bosom never glowed one generous emotion: as Mrs. Vavasour, who paints her face a quarter of an inch thick: as Lady Sophia, the type of our modern Amazon, who unsexes herself by manly sports and men's society, and never, from the time she wore pinafores, has thought as a woman: as smooth-tongued Mrs. Mulciber, time-serving, self-seeking, the trafficker in society's small vices and large foibles, garnering up her riches out of other people's worthlessness. One woman, and one only, have I seen straight, truthful, original, independent; scorning fortune when it was at

her feet, daring to live her own life in the teeth of adverse circumstances. Such an one will I honour and reverence. She and no other shall be my queen.'

Lady Lashmar looked at her son's impassioned face with absolute horror. 'Is this madness?' she murmured. 'Why, I thought you hated the girl.'

'So did I, mother. God knows I tried my hardest to hate her, schooled myself to believe that I detested her, would not suffer my eye to linger upon her face, or my memory to recall her gracious presence. And yet in spite of it all she drew me. It has seemed like witchcraft; but now I begin to understand that it was simple force of character, the influence of a pure, untarnished soul upon one that had been blemished and clouded by contact with the world. I believe that Providence meant her for me—that my brother trained her for me—that all things have tended unawares to one happy ending—she is to be mine!'

'If you do this thing, Victorian—if you, my son, with your opportunities, marry so far beneath you, I suppose you know that you will break my heart?'

'I know that I shall do nothing of the kind, mother sweetest. There will be a feeling of disappointment no doubt. You would have preferred to see the Lashmar coffers replenished with the wealth which Danebrook made in the iron trade. You had rather I had married the ironmaster's daughter, albeit that on her father's side she comes from a much lower grade than Boldwood's orphan child. But this regret once past, you will rejoice in your new daughter, since she has been as a daughter to you already, though you did not know it.'

There was a pause, a silence which seemed long, Victorian still on his knees by his mother's chair.

He had been prepared for a violent outbreak, for ungovernable anger; prepared to hear himself denounced and cast off as an unworthy son. But to his surprise the dowager sat for some moments with her hands shading her eyes, and her lips silent. He almost thought that she was weeping.

'I have missed her sorely,' she said at last, 'yes, sorely. She comforted me with that low, sweet voice of hers; her reading has been a kind of music which soothed my tortured nerves. She has been very sweet, infinitely patient, as sympathetic as I would ever allow her to be. But you are right in your accusation, Victorian. I was never kind to her. I was always afraid of being too kind, of letting her see how necessary she was to me. We are made of hard stuff, you and I, Victorian. We come of a hard race, a race with whom pride of birth has been ever a kind of religion. It is difficult to stoop, when such pride as that is bred in our bone, the heritage of a thousand generations. And for my son to marry a girl of no parentage—a domestic in his mother's house!'

'Her father was an Oxford graduate!'

'My dear Victorian, consider the herds of Oxford graduates, down to the sons of Oxford hair-dressers. People will ask who your wife is. How can you answer them?'

'I will leave the answer to time and the lady who bears my name. Her beauty and her genius should be an all-sufficient answer. But she is not mine yet: I am talking like Alnaschar. God knows where and when she and I may meet. I am haunted by a hideous foreboding, tortured by the maddening iteration of six miserable words.'

'What words?'

'"Look for her among the dead."'

And then he told his mother the story of the slate-writing, and how he had tried to look upon the whole thing as a folly, but had been distracted by the import of words which seemed to interpret his worst fears.

'Was it my brain that impelled the pencil?' he said. 'Had my thoughts any electrical power which transmitted meaning through a self-acting slate pencil? It seems like madness.'

Lady Lashmar was one of those hard, clear-headed people who would have looked a sheeted ghost straight in the face on the stroke of midnight, and would have said, 'You are only an optical delusion, and I am not going to be scared by you.' She smiled in gentle scorn at her son's simplicity.

'My poor Victorian,' she murmured, 'to think that you who were once so sensible should fill your mind with such follies! On the eve of a general election, too, when you want all your wits about you.'

Lashmar walked up and down the room in silence, for a few minutes, and then came back to his mother's chair and stood looking down at her. She had resumed her contemplative attitude, and sat gazing at the fire, in deepest melancholy.

'You are not very angry with me, I hope, mother,' he said softly.

She had been a devoted mother to him, concentrating all her hopes and dreams upon his image, risking all upon that one cast of the die. He felt he owed her more than the common duty which all men owe their mothers.

'No, Victorian, I am not angry with you. I am only angry with Fate, which fashions all things so differently from our dreams. To think

that this girl whom we both despised should have changed the very current of both our lives. What can I say to you? If you choose to marry her I cannot hinder you. I am deeply disappointed and deeply chagrined, that is all. I feel that my life has been a failure.'

'You will not feel that, mother, in the days to come, when my wife is to you as a daughter. When, with God's blessing, you shall see her children rise up and call you blessed. Good-night, I will not stay with you another moment. We have talked too much for your strength already. Shall I send Barker?'

'Barker,' repeated her ladyship with a sigh; 'yes, I suppose she had better come to help me to bed. She is a good soul, but when I am ill she always makes me worse.'

'Look for her among the dead!' All through the long sleepless nights those words haunted Lashmar with a mechanical, senseless repetition. He had not allowed Nestorius to know how much that slate-writing had troubled him, or the kindly statesman would have put him out of his pain by some assurance of Stella's safety. No, he lay tossing to and fro, ignorant of her fate, imagining every form of horror that a morbid mind can picture to itself in the dead hours of the night, when shadowy evils are rife in the overcharged brain. He thought of the river—dank weeds entangled in the blue-black hair. He thought of the express engine thundering along the dark rails—a slight girlish form flung down upon the iron way—a flash, and the young life annihilated, the very semblance of beauty gone.

And by every agony of fear, by every hour of separation he loved her so much the more.

'Look for her among the dead!' Was it the announcement of some hideous doom; or was it a riddle given him to read; or was it a chance combination of scratches upon a slate, meaning nothing but trickery and imposture? Was it for a clever piece of conjuring that he was racking his brain and torturing his heart?

He determined on going to Brumm directly after breakfast next morning. He would endeavour to see Griselda alone, free from the influence of old Mrs. Minchin, to whom he was inclined to impute evil propensities smacking of brimstone. He would question that strange girl closely, would throw himself upon her generosity, appeal to her womanly feelings and get her to relieve his mind, if it were indeed but a trick of the prestigiator's skill which had caused him such gnawing anxiety.

He went to his mother's room immediately after leaving his own, but was not able to see her. Barker informed him that her ladyship had had one of her bad nights, and was trying to get a morning sleep. Her ladyship's bad nights were a speciality, and meant insomnia of the worst kind.

Lady Carminow appeared at the breakfast-table, which was altogether an unusual thing.

'I am going home directly after breakfast, Lord Lashmar,' she said. 'I am dreadfully sorry to leave this dear old house and so many nice people; but my mother is not quite so well, and I feel I ought to go to her.'

'Not quite so well' seemed rather a vague phrase to Lashmar, who did not even know that the lady had been ailing.

'I am very sorry,' he murmured absently.

Mrs. Mulciber was in despair. Nestorius, sipping his tea, and taking furtive dips into the

newspaper beside his plate, declared that Lady Carminow's departure would be as the extinction of the sun, or something to that effect. Lady Sophia did not even pretend to be interested. She was in hat and habit ready for the fray, gobbling her breakfast ravenously in order to be off to a distant meet.

'I hope you have not forgotten my flask, Bowker,' she observed to the under-butler who was carving a ham near her.

'No, my lady.'

'Nor my sandwich case.'

'They have both been sent out to the stables, my lady.'

'Ta, ta, everybody,' said the fair Sophia, snatching up her hunting crop and hurrying out of the room. 'If you don't want to find every trace of the hounds vanished by the time you get to Chipping Danbury, you had better come with me, Mr. Ponsonby,' she said to the Queen's Counsel, who was luxuriating in a savoury mess of kidneys and mushrooms seething before him in a silver dish over a spirit lamp.'

'Haven't the faintest idea where Chipping Danbury is, and ain't going to spoil my breakfast, Lady Sophia, for any pack in England. I shall find the hounds, wherever they are. You may be sure of *that*.'

Lady Sophia banged the door and was gone.

'I'm not going to jog along nine miles of turnpike road with that pretty prattler,' remarked the barrister to Lashmar in an undertone.

He finished his breakfast in a leisurely way and dawdled in the hall while his hat was being brushed. There is a special Providence by which such men always fall in with the hounds.

Lady Carminow left the Castle at eleven o'clock

with a splash of carriages, servants, and imperials, as if she had been starting for Italy. Lashmar, relieved at her departure, became intensely civil, and danced attendance upon her to the last moment.

'I am sure you are glad I am going,' she said.

'Indeed I am not. I fear my poor mother will miss you. She has so few people whom she really cares for. Now you are going it would be better if all the others were to go. She is not equal to entertaining people, and you have been an admirable deputy.'

'Thanks for the compliment. Perhaps the others will follow my lead. Yes, I am sure it bores her ladyship to have people in the house; but for your sake she would make any sacrifice—yes, any sacrifice,' repeated Clarice, looking at him earnestly.

'Yes, she is very good to me,' answered Lashmar gravely. 'I am sorry that her desires and mine should ever run counter. But life is made up of such contradictions.'

'Do you shoot to-day?' asked Lady Carminow, while he arranged the sable rug over her knees.

'No, the pheasants will have a holiday so far as my gun is concerned, I am just off to Brumm.'

'Again? one would suppose you had a share in some great business there.'

'I wish I had—the Danebrook ironworks, for instance.'

'Oh, you need not wish for that. It would only bring you trouble. I had a most worrying letter from the manager this morning, harping upon the ill-feeling of the men and urging me to alter the whole of that splendid organisation which my father took such trouble to bring to perfection.'

'Nothing in life is stationary, Lady Carminow,

and we live just now in a period of abrupt transitions. A system which was accounted liberal in Mr. Danebrook's time would be now considered the *régime* of a despot. If your manager is a sensible man, it might be wise to take his advice.'

'That I shall never do. I will never truckle to democracy. The Danebrook Works must stand or fall as Job Danebrook planned them.'

Lady Carminow little suspected how near they were to the latter alternative. When people say they will stand or fall by a principle, they are for the most part assured that to fall is an impossibility.

The barouche drove off with its fair occupant. A cart was being loaded with imperials and bonnet boxes in the stable-yard, and there was a wagonette for her ladyship's servants, her two maids, and the tall footman who went on her messages, and carried her work-basket and music books.

Lashmar drove to Thorleigh common and called upon Mrs. Minchin.

The spirits were not propitious, or rather Mrs. Minchin had a nervous headache and was unable to see any visitor. Lashmar asked the maid if it would be possible for him to see Miss Griselda alone, and he emphasised the inquiry with a sovereign. But the servant told him that Miss Griselda was never allowed to see any one except in the presence of Mrs. Minchin; that she never left Mrs. Minchin's roof except to walk in the garden; had never been outside those walls within the servant's memory; never was allowed to go to church—the servant dwelt on this point as if even in that gifted and advanced circle she felt some hankering after old superstitions; in fact, lived from year's end to year's end in Mrs. Minchin's society and under Mrs. Minchin's

ken, and had to get up at any hour of the night to communicate between that old lady and the spirit world.

'It isn't a cheerful life for a young person,' said the maid. 'I don't think Miss Griselda is long for this world. They say mediums always die young.'

Lashmar left his card, with a pencilled request to Mrs. Minchin for another interview with the medium; and then he drove away, cursing that dismal house as he had cursed it the day before; deeming the whole spirit-system diabolical, and yet wanting to know more about it.

Were those words that had so tortured him the result of accident? Could chance so closely fit in with his own thoughts, so briefly and directly give expression to his fears?

He left his phaeton at the 'Lion and Lamb,' and went wandering about the great busy town. He was too disgusted with the police to go to them again yet awhile. He went about on his own account.

Presently it struck him that he would like to see the building from which his brother had rescued the child, and which had been re-erected after the fire. He had never seen that dreary outskirt of Brumm in which Goldwin's was situated. It lay in the opposite direction to the road by which he entered the city, and in a region which had no attraction for any explorer: one of those shabby, sordid, newly-built quarters, which have no interest save to the tax-gatherer, the city missionary, or the philanthropist.

That new town of Brumm seemed as a new world to Lashmar as he threaded its everlasting streets and terraces of squalid houses, where all the window sashes, door steps, and garden railings

were of exactly the same pattern, and where the only difference he saw in any of the houses was in their measure of shabbiness and dirt, all starting from the same point of positive dirt and shabbiness. What a dreary world it looked in the gray October day. What odours of indiscriminate foulness it exhaled—what a dismal monotony of ugliness it exhibited—and yet here babies were born and reared to men and women, and here men and women lived and sickened and got well again, and struggled on to age, and died and were fetched in the workhouse coffin! The one inevitable end of us all was perchance the only event that disturbed the dull level of such existences.

He had no difficulty in finding Goldwin's. Goldwin's had doubled in size since the time of its rebuilding, and whereas at the date of the fire it had stood gaunt and grim and new-looking amidst a desert of unlet building land, it was now hemmed round by streets of smaller houses, and reared its formidable height above the surrounding bricks and mortar, like an old three-decker amid a fleet of fishing smacks. The building was not fifteen years old, yet looked grimy and shabby enough to have been standing there for a century, if any pile so ugly could have been conceived by our ancestors, albeit they had a fine instinct for the ugly in architecture.

There stood Goldwin's, with its long lines of windows all of the same pattern, and its iron balconies one above the other, giving it the appearance of a gigantic iron cage, as it were the prison-house of unconvicted poverty. Lashmar stood on the opposite side of the narrow street gazing up at that barrack and picturing his brother's distorted figure, those long lithe arms of his drawing him upward from story to story, the slender fingers

clinging to yonder railings. The lord of broad lands risking life and limb to save one little child, whose face he had never seen.

'It was a noble thing to do,' thought Lashmar. 'I ought to have valued her for the sake of that great deed. Decent feeling, the respect due to my dead brother, should have made me kinder to her.'

He had no hope of finding Stella amidst that aggregate of struggling humanity. The police had been here at the beginning of their quest, and had assured themselves that no such person as the fugitive from Lashmar Castle had applied for a lodging at Goldwin's. He expected to get no information here, and yet he hung about the place in his despondency, not knowing where to go or what to do next, feeling impelled to do something, were it only to wander from street to street, in the vague hope of meeting the fugitive face to face at some unexpected corner.

Presently he saw a respectable elderly woman with a market basket on her arm, going in under the archway which opened into a stony quadrangle. He followed and accosted her.

'May I ask, madam, if you have been long a resident here?'

The matron turned and confronted Lashmar in some confusion, startled by the stately address, the tall upright figure and darkly handsome face, and that indescribable, inexpressible air which is ordinarily the result of good birth and a West-end tailor. Not often, no, not even when an election was on, did such a young Alcibiades enter beneath yonder arch.

'Yes, sir, I have lived here over twenty years, almost ever since the houses were built.'

'Then you remember the fire here.'

'Yes, indeed, sir; and I have good cause to

remember it, for my poor little bits of furniture were all burnt, things as I'd had from poor mother, and as belonged to her father before her, which he was a farmer in a small way in Herefordshire, for we never belonged to these parts, none of us didn't, you see, sir,' explained the lady, as if it were a merit not to be a native; 'and not one single stick insured, though I'd been thinking and talking of taking out a policy not a week before——'

Lashmar tried to stem this stream of auto-biography.

'Very sad,' he murmured. 'Did you happen to know a man called Boldwood?'

'Boldwood, that lost his life in the fire? Lor' bless you, sir, everybody knew Mr. Boldwood. He was a great man, my husband used to say, a man that ought to have been a cabinet minister; a man that had poor people's interests at heart, and would have fought our battles, if he'd ever come into power. And quite the gentleman too, though rather rough looking and careless about his clothes; and such a loving father to his little girl. She was adopted after his death by the last Lord Lashmar, and has been brought up like a lady.'

'Had Boldwood any friends in Brumm—any people in comfortable circumstances, for instance, who were interested in him and his little girl?'

'Not as I ever heard of, sir. He was a reserved kind of gentleman—never mixed with the other lodgers in the club room. He always kept close in his own room, never spoke much to anybody; and I don't think he could have had any visitors without my knowing it, for our rooms were in the same corridor as his, and I had my children running about, in and out on the balcony, and I was always on the move, so I must have seen any one going backwards and forwards to his rooms.'

'Can you show me the position of his rooms?'

'Yes, sir. The block was rebuilt just the same after the fire. But me and my husband moved down to the ground floor. We'd had enough of living up in the clouds.'

'You saved your own children—easily?' asked Lashmar.

'No, sir. It weren't easy. My husband carried 'em down stairs, through the smoke and flame, and I was too 'mazed like to think of other people's children till we'd got out into the street, and looked up at the great burning house, and felt our lives were safe. And then I says, "Where's Boldwood's little girl?" and my husband says, "She's all right, you may depend. Boldwood's not the kind of man to lose his head in a fire." We never gave a thought about the meeting in the Town Hall, and the chance of Boldwood's being away. I hope you don't think, sir, that I'd leave a motherless child to be burnt to death if I had the power to save her?'

Lashmar assured the matron that he had no such thought; and then they went back into the street, and she pointed out two windows on the fourth story.

'The little girl used to sit out on the balcony all day in summer time,' said the woman. 'Boldwood had put up an extra rail, to make it safer for her, and had divided off his bit of balcony from the rest with wire netting, so that she sat there all alone like a bird in a cage. He didn't want her to mix with the other children, and she didn't seem to want to play with them. She was very shy, and when they spoke to her she answered in a foreign language. She had her little toys, and she seemed to amuse herself contentedly hour after hour: but I always felt sorry for her in those long lonely days, when her father was away.'

Certainly a sad and solitary infancy, followed by a desolate girlhood.

'She used to watch the funerals going by to the cemetery,' said the dame, who had no desire to cut short the conversation, albeit the rudiments of her husband's high tea were lying in her basket, and the day was wearing towards afternoon. 'There weren't near so many houses about here in those days. It was almost open country, and she could see everything that went along the road to the cemetery, and used to sit and watch and watch, and wonder and wonder. I could see it in her face, sometimes, when I stopped to look at her. But she never asked me no questions. She little thought how soon her daddy that she was so fond of would be lying in that cemetery.'

'Is it near here?' asked Lashmar.

'Not half a mile.'

'I'll go and look at Boldwood's grave. Good-morning, madam. If you will accept a trifle by way of——'

He did not further explain himself, but dropped some loose silver into the matron's willing hand and left her curtseying on the pavement. Was there ever such a gentleman—so noble-looking, so free in his manners, and so open-handed?

Lashmar found his way to the cemetery, which had been placed remote from the town in the first instance and was still well in the outskirts. It was a noble cemetery, as to spaciousness, though a little monotonous as to art. But trees and shrubs had thriven, the place was neatly kept, and on Sunday evenings this garden of death was a favourite resort for the sober and serious among the working people of Brumm, the people who liked to go to chapel, and take their quiet walk after chapel.

Boldwood's grave? The man at the lodge was

not a political enthusiast; had never heard of Mr. Boldwood; could give no information as to his last resting-place.

So Lashmar wandered up and down till he found the handsome headstone which his brother had erected to mark the demagogue's grave.

'In memory of Jonathan Boldwood, a man of advanced opinions and strong sympathies with the poor and the oppressed, who perished in the endeavour to save his infant daughter's life, and who was much beloved and regretted by the working classes of this city.'

'By their works ye shall know them.'

This was the epitaph which Hubert, Lord Lashmar, had caused to be engraved on the Republican's headstone.

Victorian stood looking at the words in a dreamy forgetfulness, listless, tired, physically and mentally. Would he ever find her whom he sought—would he ever?

In the impatience of his temper, in the intensity of all his feelings, it seemed to him as if he had been looking for her for ages, had exhausted every mode of search, and must needs despair. He had driven her from him and she had gone. 'You told me to march,' she had said to him, recalling his speech of the past. 'You need not tell me that this time. I am going to march.'

And she had marched, into infinite space, whither he knew not; and he stood here in this place of graves, stood desolate and lonely among the dead, and despaired of ever seeing her face again.

'Look for her among the dead!' That was what the oracle had said. And he was here

among the dead, had been impelled here, as it were, by some blind instinct, not knowing why he came. He started with a thrill of horror, and looked about him for a new-made grave, forgetting how brief the time since she had left the Castle. Scarcely time enough for death and burial. Yes, there was a new grave near Boldwood's headstone: a narrow mound of raw yellow clay, roughly fashioned by the grave-digger's spade. He stood looking at it with fixed eyes, like a man struck by epilepsy, for a moment or so, till an approaching footstep startled him from that trance of fear.

He turned and saw a tall slim figure drawing near, that black-robed girlish form which he had seen so often in the corridors at Lashmar, and had shunned, apprehending an indefinable danger, the peril of his peace of mind, which was ever disturbed by that presence.

He had looked for her among the dead, and had found her living, lovely as when she had last looked upon him in her pride and anger.

She bowed gravely, startled for a moment, but composed herself instantly with wondrous self-command, and would have passed him, but he stopped her.

'Stella,' he said, holding out his hand.

'Lord Lashmar?' interrogatively, and without accepting the offered hand.

'Stella, will you not forgive me? I have been seeking for you ever since that night. I have desired nothing on this earth so much as your forgiveness. Will you not forgive me? Will you not shake hands with me? By your father's grave.'

That plea was irresistible. She gave him her hand without a word. It was the first time

their hands had ever so met. His grasp tightened upon the little hand, and he drew her nearer to him, she shrinking all the while, looking at him with frightened eyes, half angry, half wondering.

They were alone in the place of graves—alone amidst the populace of the dead: no one within sight or ear-shot.

'Stella, I have but one plea for pardon, but one excuse for my brutality the other night, for my coldness, my neglect, my absolute unkindness in all the years that have gone over us since my brother's death. My excuse for my conduct that night is, that I was mad with jealousy; my excuse for years of unkindness is, that I have been the slave of caste. I have tried not to love you, and I love you more passionately than ever I thought to love any living woman, were she peeress or princess. All my pride of birth, all my greed of gain, are flung to the winds. I love you, Stella, and live only to love you. Say, sweet, am I forgiven?'

She had turned giddy with the suddenness of this surprise, fainting under the shock of an unspeakable happiness. Her eyelids drooped, and there were flashes of light across her eyeballs, and a rushing sound in her head. Her cheek lay ghastly white against her lover's shoulder, as he caught her to his breast and just saved her from falling.

'My beloved, say I am forgiven. Say that I may hope.'

Her pale lips tried to answer, but were too tremulous for speech. There was a pause, and then the heavy eyelids were slowly lifted, as with a painful effort, a soul coming back to life and consciousness, and the large dark eyes looked up at him.

'I have hated myself so bitterly for loving you,'

she faltered; 'I have scorned myself for loving the man who despised me.'

'Ah, then we are both content,' he said, kissing her. 'We have both struggled, and we have both been beaten by Fate, which is stronger than either of us. My beloved, I am ineffably happy: there is not in this world a man more deeply blest. And now come back to the Castle and read to my mother, who has been pining for you: and be to her as a daughter. She too has tried to shut her heart against you, but I suspect that she too loves you. She knows everything, dearest, knows that you are to be my wife, if I can win you.'

'Will she not be angry with you for such a choice?' asked Stella.

'No, she bore it like a lamb. Don't you know that her strong point is common sense, and sensible people always submit quietly to the inevitable. Come, dearest, we can get a fly somewhere outside the cemetery, and drive to the hotel where I left my phaeton. We shall be at the Castle in time for afternoon tea. I believe her ladyship will be delighted. She began to find out your value directly you were gone.'

Stella explained to him that she could not possibly leave Brumm thus abruptly. She had found kind friends and a home there, and her friends must not be left with discourtesy. Her feminine instinct told her that to be driven back to the Castle in Lord Lashmar's phaeton would be to create a scandal. If she was to return there at all she could not return too quietly.

'If her ladyship really wishes me to go back perhaps she will be kind enough to write me a line, and to send a conveyance for me to-morrow,' she said.

'She shall do so. Yes, perhaps it would be best. But it shall be to-day, not to-morrow.'

They went out of the cemetery together, and through the streets of Brumm, talking to each other as if they had been lovers of a year's standing. The love pent up in either breast, the passion long held in check drew them together in a moment. They met as rivers meet, and mingled as rivers mingle. The shock of the meeting was tremendous, but the union was instantaneous and complete.

The Chapmans' shop was not very far from Goldwin's, nor a long way from the cemetery.

Stella explained that since she had dwelt in Brumm she had gone daily, and sometimes twice a day, to her father's grave.

'It was the only thing I could do to be near him,' she said.

'Ah, it was my cruelty which told you of his death.'

'It was better for me to know the truth,' she answered gently. 'All my dreams about him were childish dreams. I ought to have known that if he were living he would have come for me or sent for me. He would not have lived away from me all those years and made no sign. And I honour him more and more—love him more I cannot—for the sacrifice of his life. What am I worth that two such noble lives should have been risked for me?'

'You are worth all the world to me, Stella,' answered her lover fondly; 'and Nestorius tells me that you are going to be the most charming story-teller — if I were an American I should say romancist—of the age, and to delight all the world.'

'Mr. Nestorius is too kind.'

'And he asked you to be his wife—he, the man whom women have adored—and you refused him. Why did you reject such a man, Stella?'

She was silent, the pale cheeks kindling with a sudden blush, the eyelids drooping.

'Why, Stella? why?' he urged.

'Because I could care for no one in the world but you,' she answered falteringly. 'You who seemed so far off and so cruel.'

'But who loved you passionately all the time, Stella; loved you and fought against his inclination; tried to be wiser than Fate. If you knew how laboriously I endeavoured to fall in love with Lady Carminow you would understand how potent was that other influence which drew my thoughts away from her.'

They were at Mrs. Chapman's corner by this time—a corner shop in a street of small, shabby little houses, out of which opened right and left other streets of just the same pattern.

'There is no private door,' said Stella; 'would you mind going through the shop?'

'I should adore it. I have never seen a shop of the kind,' laughed Lashmar.

He had to bend his head a little under the treasures hanging from the ceiling, bacon, candles onions, lemons in nets.

'What a dear little shop!' he exclaimed, 'and so well found. It is like the steward's cabin on my Norwegian yacht.'

Stella led him into the parlour, that sacred chamber so rarely tenanted in the day-time. The Chapman family were taking four o'clock tea in the kitchen.

Stella went into them and told them how Lord Lashmar had come to thank them for their kindness to her, and how her ladyship wished her to go back to the Castle.

'I think I shall have to leave you this evening, or to-morrow at least,' she said shyly, 'but I shall

never forget your kindness or cease to think of you as my friends. And I shall come to see you sometimes if you will let me.'

'Of course we will, my lass, and always glad to see your pretty face,' said the genial Chapman, looking up from a breakfast cup of steaming tea.

'Lord Lashmar here!' exclaimed Polly with an awe-stricken look. 'Didn't I tell you so? Oh, you naughty girl, to try to deceive me.'

'May I come in, Mrs. Chapman?' asked Lashmar, showing himself in the doorway between parlour and kitchen.

'Oh! your lordship, such a poor place,' faltered Mrs. Chapman, and the whole family stood up, including the printer's reader, who had been shelling shrimps for his beloved.

Lashmar shook hands with Chapman just as affably as if he had been electioneering, as that worthy citizen remarked afterwards, and thanked the whole family in heartiest fashion for their goodness to Miss Boldwood.

'She will have another name before long, I hope,' he added, glancing fondly at the blushing face, 'and when she is Lady Lashmar she can take care that her housekeeper deals at Mr. Chapman's for bacon and bloaters and things,' with a vague reminiscence of the mingled odours he had perceived as he passed through the shop.

'Oh! my lord, you do us too much honour,' said the grocer. 'But I hope your lordship will always remember that it was Jonathan Boldwood's daughter we set store by, not the future Lady Lashmar.'

'And Jonathan Boldwood's daughter will not become ungrateful because she changes her name,' answered Lashmar. 'And, now, dearest, I will leave you with your friends for a couple of

hours longer. The carriage will be here for you by six o'clock, I hope. Good-day Mrs. Chapman.'

He shook hands all round, even with the printer's reader, who was a rabid Radical in the abstract, but admired a nobleman in the flesh. Polly felt that hand-shake was an event in her life, something to remember and talk about in years to come. There was no doubt about it there was a something, an indescribable air about blue blood; which may be taken to mean that Polly had never before seen a man who had been trained in the Eton playing-fields, and had rowed in the Oxford eight; nor yet a man clothed by Poole or Smallpage.

'Didn't I say so, now, Miss Boldwood?' repeated Polly, when his lordship had gone. 'Didn't I see through you the other night, for all you kept your secret so well?'

'I had no secret to keep, Polly. Please don't laugh at me, I can't bear it,' said Stella feebly.

It was with difficulty she kept back her tears. Mrs. Chapman patted her on the back, as if she had been suffering from a crumb in her wind-pipe: Polly wreathed an affectionate arm round her waist as she sat by the family tea-table.

''Ave a few s'rimps, Miss Boldwood,' said the printer's reader, who was somewhat faulty in his pronunciation, though he knew the English language when he saw it in type, and had brought many a patrician to book on the burning question of the objective case.

'Well, I congratulate you with all my 'art, my dear Miss Boldwood,' said Mrs. Chapman.

'How handsome he is too,' sighed Polly: 'the very image of Guy Livingston.'

CHAPTER XXII

'HERE LODGE AS IN A SANCTUARY'

STELLA obeyed her lover, and gathered together her manuscripts and those few cherished books which were nearly all the possessions she had brought away from Lashmar Castle. She packed the little bag which had made her arms ache so terribly in the long tramp from Lashmar to Brumm, and awaited the letter and the carriage that were to be sent at his lordship's bidding.

Would her ladyship condescend to write to her, she wondered, were it only so much as one line to desire her return—that proud, self-contained mistress who had ever treated her as a slave, a being of inferior race, with whom she could have no sympathy; who had accepted all her ministrations, her patient watchings, the tender touches of light hands bathing the aching brow; who had let this girl sit beside her bed night after night, and had never by word or token given love or gratitude in return? Would she stoop so low as to request the runaway slave to go back to her servitude? Would she endure the thought that this poor helot was to be her son's wife?

Stella told herself that Lady Lashmar would not brook such an alliance, that she would not suffer her presence under these altered circumstances, and that no letter and no carriage would come from the Castle in quest of her, however urgently Lashmar might entreat his mother in her behalf.

'God help me,' she said to herself on her knees beside the pallet bed in the little room on the half flight, 'am I to sow dissension between mother and son, part them perhaps for ever, they two who have been all the world to each other? Ought I not sooner to give him up, my newly beloved? But I love him so dearly, so dearly!'

She prayed fervently, with tears—prayed that she might be guided and inspired to do what was wisest and best for him her newly beloved.

New as a lover, but not newly beloved. Was he not the hero of all her childish fancies, the embodiment of every heroic form that national poetry had revealed to her? Odin—Achilles—each mythic name had clothed itself in his shape. And in the stories of her own weaving, those fictions with which she had comforted herself in the loneliness of her own prosaic life, did not the hero always speak with his voice, and wear his form? Cruel, hard, and proud had her heroes ever been; long-suffering, submissive, Griselda-like, her heroines: loving in silence, unrequited, unloved. Her own thoughts and feelings had coloured all those early efforts at romance-weaving; unconsciously she had spun the thread of each story from her own heart. And now she sat in the little room and waited to see what new thing Fate would do for her—Fate which had lifted her into elysium since the stroke of noon; which might condemn her to despair before the stroke of midnight!

She sat and waited, and towards six o'clock began to listen for the sound of carriage wheels in the street below. It was dark, but she had not lighted her candle.

Six o'clock and no carriage. She heard the hour struck by one church and two factory clocks. A quarter past, half-past, and still no sound of wheels.

No, it was quite evident her ladyship had refused to write, were it so much as a single line. Lashmar was at a loss how to act, his mother having refused to receive her runaway servant.

Hark! carriage wheels, decidedly carriage wheels, and the rhythmical trot of a pair of horses. Stella ran into the front room and looked out. The blaze of carriage lamps seemed to illuminate all the street. It flashed in upon her as she stood at the window.

The carriage was her ladyship's own chariot, the horses were her own particular seventeen-handers, grand, upstanding bays, which in that shabby little street looked almost as large as a pair of elephants.

Had this state vehicle been sent in mockery, Stella wondered, scared at the spectacle? Was it a piece of practical irony on the part of Lady Lashmar?

A footman opened the door, and the dowager herself alighted, moving slowly and feebly, leaning on the tall footman's arm a little as she descended to earth, but tall, stately, and regal of aspect in her long black velvet mantle bordered with darkest sable.

Stella went downstairs to receive this most unexpected visitor—went white and trembling to greet her; while the Chapman family, who had flown to the door expecting a fire-engine, and one small girl, with a large jug, who had come for threepennyworth of golden syrup, stood at gaze, aghast at this aristocratic vision.

'Stella, I have come to fetch you,' said her ladyship, in the easiest manner. 'You were very foolish and very impetuous in running away because of a few uncivil words from an impulsive young man. Put on your bonnet while I thank these kind people for having taken care of you.'

The Chapmans entreated her ladyship not to overpower them. They had done but that which they would do willingly for any respectable young female in distress; how much the more for the daughter of Jonathan Boldwood, who had spoken such noble words for the cause of the poor. These honest people were altogether overcome by the apparition of the dowager. She appeared to them much more awe-inspiring, more august in her splendour than that noble-looking gentleman, her son. There had been in him a free-and-easy air which had taken off the edge of his grandeur. But this tall, pale, elderly lady, with the aquiline nose and white hair, and flowing velvet mantle heavily bordered with fur, seemed to them a being apart, the very embodiment of aristocracy.

Stella did not detain her ladyship long amidst the odours of rank bacon, strong butter, American cheese, and onions. She reappeared in two or three minutes, carrying her bag of books.

'Let John take that, my dear,' and the powdered youth, who had been hovering on the threshold, sprang forward to relieve Stella of her burden.

She kissed Mrs. Chapman and her daughter, shook hands with the general dealer, and followed her ladyship to the carriage, what time the small customer, jug in hand, still stood at gaze, and waited patiently for her golden syrup, deeply interested in the spectacle. Never before in that street had those young eyes beheld a pair of high-steppers, powdered footman, and flashing carriage lamps.

Another minute, and the horses were trotting along the narrow street, and Stella was folded in Lady Lashmar's arms.

'My child, I have had to bear the disappoint-

ment of all my long-meditated hopes; but I find that God has been good to me even in frustrating my plans, and I have found the daughter best calculated to make my declining years happy. Oh, Stella, I have tried not to love you, but first you made yourself necessary to me, and then, in my desolation and loneliness, I discovered that you had made yourself very dear to me.'

'Lady Lashmar, can you really accept me as your son's wife?'

'Yes, Stella, I have thought out the question deliberately, and I can take you to my heart and rejoice in my new daughter. I have tried very hard to love Clarice, and I have never quite succeeded. There has always been an *arrière pensée*, a suspicion of her heartlessness and shallowness. I have loved you in spite of myself, almost as Victorian loved you. My heart and my intellect have both been conquered. Stella, I have been cold and repellent. I have been cruel even. Can you forgive me, can you be to me as a daughter?'

'Oh, Lady Lashmar, I only wanted to be allowed to love you,' faltered the girl, her cheek against the dowager's shoulder, her waist encircled by the dowager's arm.

'The permission is freely given, child. Love me your hardest, love me with all your might. I may not be spared many years to enjoy your love—to see you and Victorian happy together—to live in a new atmosphere of love. It will be the Indian summer of my life.'

Mrs. Muleiber was in the hall when the dowager and Stella alighted from the carriage. Domestic convulsions were her natural element. She came on board the family ship at such times like a pilot, and thought no barque could get

safely to harbour without her assistance. She took Stella in her arms, and cooed over her with a sound as of an elderly wood-pigeon.

'My sweet girl, did I not tell you it would be so?' she murmured.

'Oh, Mrs. Mulciber, you told me something quite different.'

'Did I, dear? About Mr. Nestorius? Ah, to be sure I did. But I was right, you see. I knew you were destined to make a great marriage. And now run and dress for dinner.'

'I have dined with my friends in Brumm,' answered Stella. 'I shall have some tea in my own room, thanks.'

Mr. Nestorius had heard from Lashmar how the fugitive had been found—among the dead; and how in that place of death the bond of union had been sealed between the living. He and Lashmar had talked gravely together for a little while, and then Nestorius had bid him a kind and quiet farewell, and had driven to the railway station on his way to London.

'Will you not stay? Would you not like to see her?' pleaded Lashmar.

'No, my dear friend, the wound is too new. I love her too well to be able quite honestly and frankly to rejoice in her happiness yet awhile. Years hence, when you are a family man, I may once more be your guest and hers. Old Dr. Time has an ointment for all wounds.'

Stella did not appear at the eight o'clock dinner, as officious Mrs. Mulciber would have had her appear, accepting at once all the importance of her position as Lashmar's promised bride. She had some tea in Barker's sitting-room, and was wept over by the warm-hearted Barker, and slipped back

into her old life as naturally as if she had only left the Castle for a few days' holiday.

'Will you come down to the drawing-room with me and be made known to my son's friends?' asked her ladyship.

'Not for the world, dear Lady Lashmar,' she pleaded: 'let me be just what I have been, your reader and amanuensis. Only love me a little, if you can. It is so sweet to be loved.'

Her eyes filled with tears as she spoke, and for the second time Victorian's mother took her to her bosom and kissed her.

'I cannot help loving you,' she said. 'Yes, it is sweet to be loved. You have been patient and faithful to me without reward, poor child. Henceforward give me love for love. There shall be no debt unpaid between us.'

Lady Lashmar dined in her own room, pleading fatigue as a reason for not joining her guests, and the downstairs party, freed from the dazzling splendour of those two stars, Lady Carminow and Mr. Nestorius, and inspired by Victorian's high spirits, gave themselves up to an almost rollicking joviality, which scandalised the chief butler and his subordinates. It was the merriest dinner party there had been at the Castle since the assembling of the shooters. Lady Sophia and Captain Vavasour kept up a cross fire of anecdote and epigram; Mrs. Mulciber cooed and murmured in her host's ear, telling him how she had admired Stella from the first moment of beholding her; how she had tried to win, and, as she hoped, had succeeded in winning the sweet girl's friendship; and how she had seen from the first that he and Stella must inevitably be attached to each other.

'The very fact that you never spoke of her,

and that she never spoke of you, convinced me of it,' she said. '*That* is an infallible sign.'

'I see. Silence is the great test. Well, I can talk of her now, and I feel as if I could talk of nothing else. But I must not be egotistical. For a man to talk of his betrothed is almost as bad as to talk of himself. He bores his friends just as much. Had you a good run, Lady Sophia?'

'Detestable. A horrid ringing brute that kept us jogging up and down the same lanes for an hour and a half, and then went to ground. We dug him out, I am happy to say.'

'I remember an old dog fox in the Campagna——' began Captain Vavasour. Whereupon everybody began to talk at a tremendous rate, as if he had opened the flood-gates of conversation. They all knew that old dog fox and the dismal long story he carried by way of brush, and they flung good manners to the winds.

'What about Lamington's speech at Chester yesterday?'

'Did you see the *Times* leader upon Snooks?'

'What a success they seem to have made with the new play at the Lyceum.' And in this wise they chopped Captain Vavasour's Roman fox.

'Never again will I mention a fox in that man's hearing,' said Lashmar, after dinner in the smoking-room: 'not even Ben Jonson's Volpone, nor the great Whig Statesman. His Campagna story is intolerable, and I believe he would tell it three times a week if we gave him the opening.'

'My dear fellow, he would tell it every day and twice a day if he could get hearers,' replied Ponsonby. 'And I don't believe he ever hunted in the Campagna or anywhere else.'

A little later Lashmar saw his male friends amusing themselves in the billiard room, while Mrs. Mulciber and the rest of the women were sitting round the drawing-room fire, deep in the discussion of the last big scandal in the great world, and indulging in as many repetitions of 'he said' and 'she said' as if they had been washerwomen. Seeing his guests thus content and happy, he slipped away and went to his mother's room, where he found Stella and the dowager sitting opposite each other by that hearth where Lady Lashmar had sat and brooded in her loneliness last night.

He drew in his chair between them, and they three sat there for an hour, talking of the future, perfectly happy and at ease. And then he bade his mother and his betrothed good-night, with a kiss and a benediction for each. He looked in at the drawing-room where the very same scandal was still being discussed, in tones of deeper solemnity; and then he went back to the billiard room and made believe to have been only absent ten minutes or so.

'How are you fellows getting on?' he asked. 'What's the score?'

'Only just begun. This is the third game since you went away. Vavasour has been licking me horribly. I believe he is a professional in disguise.'

In his new and strange happiness—so strange to a proud, self-contained nature, which for the first time surrenders itself to its twin soul and ceases to dwell apart—Victorian did not forget the poor, pale oracle who, by some mysterious faculty, had foreshadowed his meeting with his beloved.

He had found her among the dead. Whether those scratches upon the hidden slate—so utterly unexplainable in their mode and manner of produc-

tion—had but by accident hit upon a kind of prophecy, or whether there were indeed some touch of hypernatural power in that very commonplace-looking adept, Mrs. Minchin's *protégée*, Lord Lashmar did not take upon himself to determine. But in the fulness of his own content he felt a pang of regretful compassion for that fading life of the oracle, and her dismal bondage to a hard task-mistress; and he wished, were it possible, to do her some kindness.

He drove once more to the gloomy old house on Thorleigh Heath, and once more was admitted into the dreary-looking drawing-room, where Mrs. Minchin came to him. Not a word did he say as to the fulfilment of a prophecy. He did not want to add fuel to the flame of Mrs. Minchin's lunacy.

'I am leaving Lashmar to-morrow,' he said; 'and before I go I should like much to offer some substantial token of my interest in your young friend Griselda. Will you allow her to accept this cheque for a hundred pounds?' taking a sealed envelope from his breast pocket. 'It may serve as an addition to any little provision which you have made for her in your will.'

'I cannot accept it for her. And I am sure she would not accept it for herself,' answered Mrs. Minchin, with an icy air. 'She is above all considerations of earthly dross. She has no pleasure in the things that please other women. The world outside these walls has no interest for her.'

'May not that be because she has never been allowed to see the outer world or to taste its pleasures?' asked Lashmar. 'Do not you think it is a hard thing to take a young life like hers and imprison it within four walls—to let the

young soul beat itself out against prison-bars, like a bird in a cage?'

'Her soul has never been fettered,' replied the old lady, fixing him with an eye that glittered, like the Ancient Mariner's, with an unholy light. 'Her soul has soared beyond the boundaries of earth into the infinite of the spirit-world. Would you substitute earthly pleasures, play-houses, race-courses, dances, for such joys as she has known? She who has held communion with the souls of the mighty dead; to whom the voice of Socrates is more familiar than any living voice. She who has received the confidences of great spirits which have been ripening towards perfection for two thousand years. She who has listened to Confucius, who has absorbed the wisdom of Buddha.'

'But in the meantime her health has been sapped, her physical powers have dwindled,' remonstrated Lashmar: 'she has been dying inch by inch.'

'Call it not death but promotion. Every day brings her nearer to her spirit guides—they are calling her hourly. As her thread of earthly life wears thinner the link between her soul and the spirit-world strengthens, her inspirations are more marvellous. No, Lord Lashmar, she will never need your bounty, nor will she need any provision of mine. Old as I am I shall outlive her.'

'If you do it will be murder. Her death will lie at your door,' said Lashmar indignantly. 'You have no right so to waste a young life for your pleasure.'

'For my pleasure!' echoed Mrs. Minchin indignantly. 'It is in the cause of science she has wasted herself, as you in your enlightenment would call it. She has dedicated herself to the advancement of psychology, to the etherealisation of

humanity, to the glorious cause of spirit against flesh. She is perfectly happy. She has not a wish unfulfilled.'

'Let me be assured of that, Mrs. Minchin. Let me see her and let me speak to her—in your presence, if you like. I should be relieved to hear from her own lips that she is contented with her fate.'

Mrs. Minchin complied without a word. She rang a bell three times, and soon after the third ringing Griselda entered the room.

Her countenance wore the same expressionless and apathetic look it had worn before. She advanced to meet Lord Lashmar, and allowed her limp cold hand to lie in his for a moment or so by way of greeting. She showed neither surprise nor pleasure at seeing him.

'Griselda, I want you to accept a little gift from me—a gift of a hundred pounds, which you can spend in any way you may fancy,' said Lashmar, watching her closely as he spoke, to see if she looked to Mrs. Minchin for guidance before replying, to discover if she were indeed a free agent.

By not a sign did she betray her slavery, if she were a slave. Not one ray of cupidity lighted up her waxen features.

'I do not want any money,' she answered simply.

'But you are not over-well, I hear. A change from this dull house to some pleasant lively place by the sea would do you good. Pray, take this money and spend it for your health and comfort. I am sure Mrs. Minchin will allow you to accept my little gift.'

'I do not forbid her,' said the old woman. 'She has other guides than me.'

'No, I do not want any money,' answered

Griselda, without the faintest expression of grateful feeling. 'I do not wish to leave this house. The spirits come to me here. They might forsake me in a strange house.'

'But your health is suffering.'

'That cannot be helped. I have been told how long I have to live.'

'And you are contented, happy?' interrogated Lashmar.

'Yes, I am as happy as I can ever be in this world. There will be a greater happiness, a newer, wider life when I am free, like them.'

Lashmar felt that argument was vain. He could but pity the young fanatic, and feel intense disgust for the patroness who had worn out that young life for the gratification of her own fancies and theories.

'If ever you have need of a friend outside these walls you have only to write or send to me, he said. 'You will not forget—Lord Lashmar Lashmar Castle.'

'Then there are two Lord Lashmars,' said Griselda, looking at him fixedly.

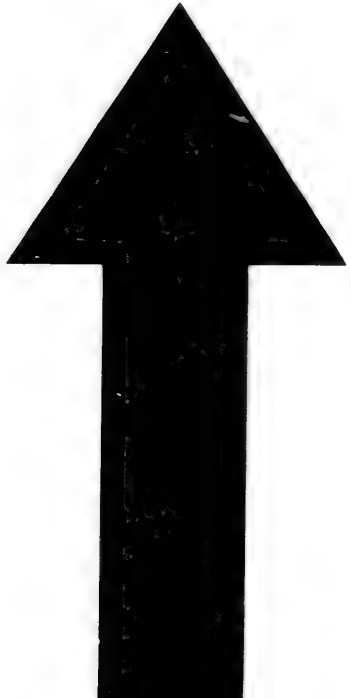
'How do you mean?'

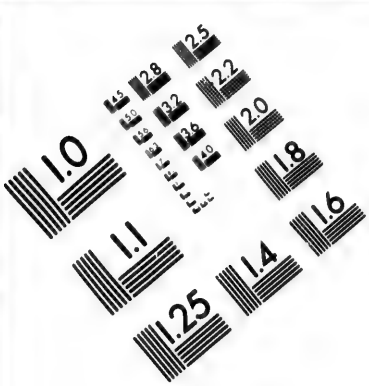
'There is one in the spirit world. Do you remember the second message on the slate the day you were here last?'

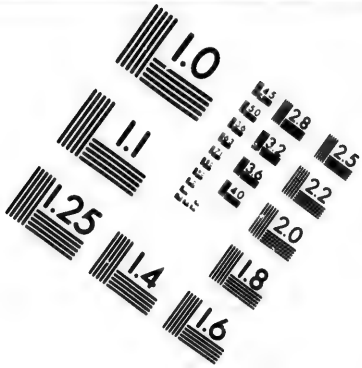
'Yes.'

'That was signed Lashmar. You were too excited by the message, and you did not look at it long enough to see the signature. It was very dim, but I was able to read the name—Lashmar.'

Guests and host were all gone by the end of the week, each to his or her several destinies. Lashmar to make speeches in the endeavour to enlighten that great mass of the washed and unwashed, who were







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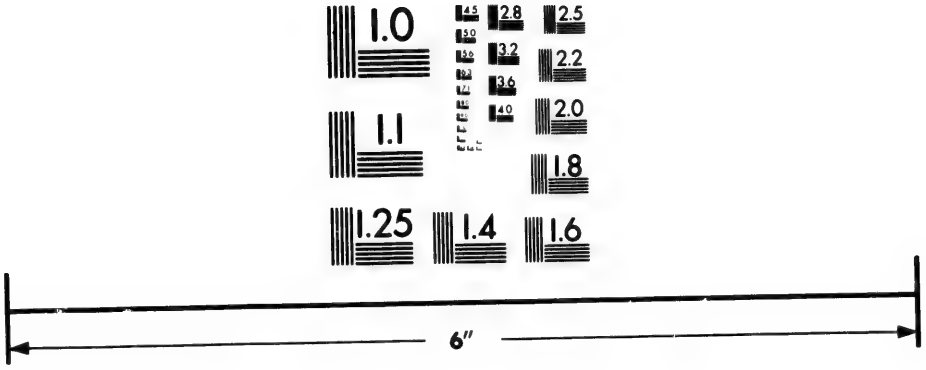

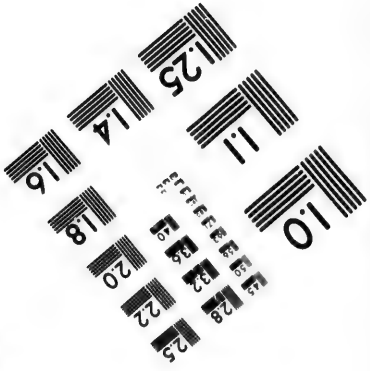

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soon to exercise their elective function and to return Whig or Tory, as the tide of popular opinion flowed this way or that. He was to come back for a week at Christmas; and then he was to go away again and appear no more till he came in the season of woodland primroses and budding hedges to claim his bride. Lady Lashmar had stipulated that he should wait six months. He was to give himself this much time in which to be sure of himself and his own feelings, and he was to give her this much time in which to take her new daughter to her heart.

'I want her to grow to me; I want her to be verily as my daughter before you give her the right to call me mother', she said; 'and when once there is this bond of love between us neither you nor she shall ever have cause to dread the influence of the proverbial mother-in-law.'

'I have no fear of that, mother. I know how noble you are, and that when once you have accepted a position——'

'I shall perform the duties of that position. Yes, Victorian; but in this instance I hope to render something more than duty.'

Lashmar was too grateful to rebel. He steeped himself in the political vortex, and tried to give wings to the days and hours which divided him from the realisation of all his hopes.

Lady Lashmar had a month of serious illness during her son's absence, throughout which Stella nursed her with unwearying patience and care: and day by day and hour by hour the bond grew closer between them, and the proud, reserved nature opened its treasure-house of tender feeling.

'Ah, Stella, my Stella, you have given me

new hopes and new joys in spite of myself,' murmured the dowager once, in the deep of night, when Stella had been sitting for hours beside her bed. 'After all, love is the one thing needful for us poor mortals in our earthly pilgrimage—the one star to guide us through earth's dark labyrinth—and in loving one another we learn to love our God, who has told us that He is Love.'

'Dear Lady Lashmar——'

'Call me mother; never again by any colder name.'

'Dear mother, you have filled my life with gladness. I never could have been happy with Victorian if you had denied me your love.'

Lady Carminow had not remained in England to assist at the triumph of an obscure rival. She had taken advantage of good-natured Mrs. Danebrook being 'not so well,' to whisk her off to Aix-les-Bains, as rapidly as if she had been provided with Medea's fiery chariot, and from Aix, when the weather grew colder, they went on to Montreux, and from Montreux to Bellagio, and thence to Florence.

And in one of the noblest palaces of that favoured city Lady Carminow set up her court, and surrounded herself with worshippers and sycophants of the highest quality, spending Job Danebrook's hard-won wealth with a royal lavishness which enchanted everybody.

From her Italian retreat, the Sultana of the Danebrook Ironworks held occasional communication with her vassals through her grand vizier, the manager of the works, whom she regarded as a particularly troublesome, officious, and pig-headed person, with a passion for giving unnecessary and even impertinent advice.

'I make it a rule never to take any notice of anything he says,' she observed, to one of her friends, a civil engineer, with whom, as a practical man, she sometimes discussed the prospects of the iron trade.

'But may not his advice be worth taking once in a way?' suggested this gentleman, were it only as the exception which proves the rule.'

'Oh, if I were once to give way to his ideas I should never again be mistress of my own property. I believe he is a very worthy person, and that he understands the iron trade; but he is a horrid Radical. The very air of Brumm is infected with revolution.'

In the face of this calm and sweet-tempered obstinacy the manager could do nothing. Vainly did he write his views upon the necessity of marching in the van rather than in the rear of Progress. Vainly did he inform her ladyship of increasing signs of disaffection and ill-will among her army of workers; vainly warn her of the peril to her fortune involved in this question. Lady Carminow was as obstinate as George the Third in his treatment of America, and the result was somewhat similar.

One winter midnight the city of Brumm was scared by such a conflagration as had not been seen under that murky sky for more than half a century. Men and women thronged the streets, strangers drove into the city from outlying towns and villages, little children were taken out of their beds and lifted up at windows to see the red havoc flaring against the dark of night. Every steeple and chimney-shaft stood up out of the mass of roofs like a pillar of flame, luminous

with the reflection of yonder fire. The great Danebrook Ironworks and all their dependencies—model dwelling-houses, clerks' offices, store-houses, stables—were burning, and no power of fire-engines, which Brumm or the neighbourhood could muster, could in any wise avail against the might of that gigantic conflagration.

The fire had broken out in a dozen different places, almost simultaneously. No one could doubt that there had been deliberate and elaborately plotted arson; and the traces of that crime were found afterwards in several directions, while it was also discovered that one of the conspirators, just a little less ruthless than his fellows, had sent an anonymous scrawl to the head stable-keeper, warning him to get his horses out of the way soon after dark that evening. This message the stable-keeper had brooded over for hours, and had obeyed only just in time to save his stud of magnificent cart-horses from perishing in the flames.

The loss to Lady Carminow was computed at nearly a million. Mr. Danebrook had been his own insurer. The only policies upon the whole establishment were those small policies which insured the furniture of the operatives, and which Job Danebrook had always insisted upon—paying the premiums himself, and deducting the amount from wages.

Happily there were no lives lost. It was supposed afterwards that a signal of some kind had been sent round from house to house at half-past ten o'clock, and that all were on the alert, ready to make their escape before the moment of danger. Deliberately, audaciously as the work of destruction had been carried out the conspirators were never brought to book. There was

a prolonged inquiry, and the police did their best: but among nearly fifteen hundred disaffected workmen it was not an easy matter to bring the crime home to individuals.

Seven men were arrested on suspicion, and a mass of evidence was brought together: conversations held in public-houses and club-rooms were repeated in detail—circumstantial evidence, as to the purchase of paraffine and other combustibles, was sifted and re-sifted—a hundred and fifteen witnesses were examined and cross-examined—the men were remanded, and again remanded, till newspaper readers began to tire of the Great Danebrook Arson Case: and the result was *nil.*

So the great Danebrook Ironworks came to an end like a tale that is told. Lady Carminow decisively refused to rebuild or to hear anything more about iron.

'If I could be grateful to those wretches for anything it would be for this fire,' she said, with her grand air. 'It is such a comfort to think that I am no longer in trade, and that I shall never again have my carriage blocked by a hideous procession of grimy waggons with *my* name painted upon them.'

Victorian and Stella were married in Easter week. It was an early Easter, the season of primroses and hedgerow violets and wood anemones. Such self-sown flowers seemed most in harmony with such a wedding—an union of hearts that had grown to each other unawares, overstepping all boundaries of rank and circumstance. Never was there a quieter wedding, seldom a prettier one, according to the few spectators, who were all rapturous about it afterwards.

Stella was given away by her future mother-in-law, who had all the imperial grace of a portrait by Sir Joshua Reynolds, clad in white-samite, Anglice, in a large white velvet mantle bordered with white fox, and a white velvet bonnet with ostrich feathers. The tall thin figure, silvery hair, and Marie Antoinette countenance were wondrously set off by that white velvet and fur. It was said that the dowager was a more interesting figure than the bride, although she looked lovely in her simple white cashmere gown and fox-fur jacket, and little white toque, dressed ready to start on her honeymoon journey to the land of Don Quixote, where Lashmar was to take her in search of a grandfather and a pedigree.

He had shown her the copies of her mother's letters, and they had planned this Spanish journey together. He was to take her to all the fairest spots in that romantic land, all scenes richest in historical associations, and cities rich in treasures of art; and it was only as it were *en passant* that they were to hunt for the traces of her parentage.

They were saved all trouble upon this score, for within a fortnight of their marriage Lashmar received a Spanish letter addressed to his town house, and forwarded to him on his travels.

It was from a lawyer in Madrid, who wrote to inquire whether the lady whom he had married was Jonathan Boldwood's daughter by his marriage with a Spanish lady, or whether she was the offspring of a prior or a subsequent marriage. If she were indeed the sole offspring of Jonathan Boldwood's marriage with a young Spanish lady, whom he carried off from Madrid, and was supposed to

have married at St. Martin's-in-the-Fields, London, in August 186—, the said daughter was sole heiress to Don Xavier Olivarez, merchant, who had lately died intestate, and who had left papers relating to his daughter's elopement, and letters written to him by her, in the care of the writer, his legal adviser.

Lashmar answered the letter in person, taking his bride with him. The Spaniard was an elderly man, and remembered Stella's mother.

'There is no doubt as to your lady's parentage,' he said. 'She carries the proof of it in her face. But there will be legal formalities to be gone through before she can enter into possession of her inheritance, which is in various forms of investment, partly in vineyards and other landed property, and partly in stocks and shares.'

The formalities which appeared to be necessary to complete the identification of the inheritrix lasted nearly six months, and at the end of that time Stella became possessed of about fifteen thousand pounds variously invested.

'It is more than enough to renovate that old barrack in Grosvenor Square,' said Lashmar who was eager to see his young wife take her place in society.

'And to buy an annuity for dear Mr. Verner, so that he may feel quite independent,' added Stella.

Gabriel Verner had been brought back to his old rooms in the Castle since Stella's marriage and re-instated in his post of librarian, with power to add from time to time to that magnificent collection of old books which had made Lashmar Castle famous.

Lady Lashmar's novel was published anonymously a few weeks after her marriage, and more

than justified the opinion of the publisher's reader and the admiration of that still finer critic, Mr. Nestorius.

It was the book of the season, a book which a great many people read and which everybody talked about, those who had only read the reviews talking loudest.

The freshness of the style, with its passionate flow and youthful vigour, was curiously contrasted by touches of archaic learning which set the critics wondering about the writer. Before the book had been out a month there were plenty of people ready to affirm that it was written by Mr. Nestorius; and some even went so far as to produce circumstantial evidence in proof of that authorship.

Firstly, the book was produced by Mr. Nestorius's publisher. Secondly, it had leaked out that the proofs had been sent to Mr. Nestorius. Thirdly, nobody less accomplished—of less all-round cleverness—could have written such a book.

There was, however, a small section of the reading public—chiefly women—who knew by a fine instinct that this story of passionate, unrequited love could have been written only by a woman; since only to woman is Love the One Thing Needful.

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